

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CATHY MAXWELL

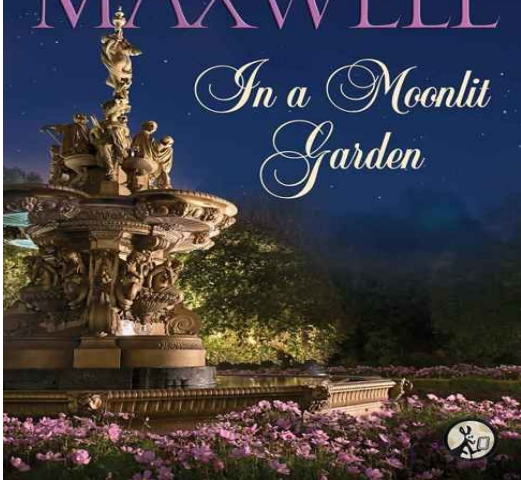
In a Moonlit Garden



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for Vern and Aavon Powers



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Chapter One



Our hero is issued a challenge for Love

Colonel Michael Sanson didn't understand women.

He certainly didn't understand himself when it came to them . . . or rather to one in particular—Ivy.

She was his Ideal. His Helen of Troy. His Cleopatra. His damn, bloody Delilah.

Five years ago, when she had been fresh from the schoolroom and he just turned one and twenty, they'd fallen in love. Of course, as the fifth son of an earl, he'd had little to offer her—a point her father, Sir William Lewin, had made clear to him. Michael

hadn't been afraid to prove his mettle. He'd purchased his colors in the military and had distinguished himself on the front lines of Barrosa and Vittoria. There'd been hardships but he'd been determined. While other officers had held back, he'd charged forward and had been promoted and honored for his valor.

Now, he had returned, a war hero and a man of substance—and he'd not once had a private moment alone with Ivy.

She hadn't had time. Instead of the shy ingenue he'd left behind, she was now considered the Incomparable, the Toast of the Season. Men lined up at her door, wealthy, titled men who could offer her everything in the world.

Worse, Michael wasn't certain how well

she remembered the fervent promises of love they had once shared. She seemed completely different from the woman he had left behind. She knew how to keep him coyly at bay while offering enough of a hint of the girl he'd fallen in love with to keep him dancing to her tune.

However, his patience was growing short and he understood tactical strategy.

He'd forced himself to ignore her at Lady Radcliff's rout. He'd wondered if she'd noticed he wasn't among the crowd of her many admirers. She had. The next day, he received a request from her for a private audience and, congratulating himself, he was on her doorstep in a trice dressed in his most dashing uniform of deep blue cloth and gold braid.

The butler escorted him into the formal sitting room where Ivy waited, looking more beautiful than any woman on earth had a right to. Blond, elegant, poised. She rose at his entrance. The air in the room was filled with the lily fragrance of her perfume, and he felt a moment of triumph.

“You are angry with me,” she said. Was it his imagination or did she appear as if she’d been crying?

Immediately, Michael was at her side. She was willowy tall with china blue eyes and a straight, aristocratic nose. “I’m not angry,” he said. “But I fear your interest may have waned.”

She shook her head in surprise. “Oh, no, not ever.”

Her vow was music to his ears. He took

her hand. “Truly, Ivy? Do you still love me?”

She smiled, a benevolent goddess able to bestow on him his most cherished wish. “I have never forgotten you.” She lowered her eyes, her dark lashes sweeping down upon her cheeks, the expression both demure and seductive. “Do you not love me . . . just a little?”

He stepped closer. “I worship you.”

She hedged away a step. “But how would I know? Last night at Lady Radcliff’s party you barely spoke to me.”

Michael wanted to pull her into his arms and demonstrate his passion with a kiss, and yet he held back. She’d always been reserved. “I would talk to your father this minute if you would say the word.”

“Say *what* word?” Sir William’s voice boomed from the doorway of the room. Ivy hurried to her father’s side.

“Nothing—” she started, but Michael decided to seize the moment.

“I wish to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage,” he said.

Sir William frowned and closed the door to the room. Michael catered to him because he was Ivy’s father and for no other reason. The man fancied himself a radical and a scientist and always had schemes for new inventions on his mind that he hoped would make him rich. Once, he was very successful in devising an oar lock for the navy and earned a knighthood for his brilliance—but he’d not had a great idea since. He also had an irritating habit of

stroking his chin as if he sported a beard. The gesture was usually a sign he was formulating some sort of scheme. He stroked his chin now as he repeated, “You wish to marry her, you say?”

Michael did not hesitate to answer. “It is my one desire.”

Ivy colored prettily, but did not speak. Her father strolled into the room where Michael stood and walked around him, his beady eyes assessing. Michael straightened his shoulders and met the man’s gaze. Sir William stopped. “How much do you want her?” he asked, his voice low.

Michael frowned at such an indelicate discussion in front of Ivy. “If you are asking about a dowry, I’m making no demands. I can support her in fine fashion. I’ve done

very well for myself under Wellington.”

Sir William laughed softly “I am aware that you have done well for yourself, Colonel, and that you have made several wise investments. There is much about you to be admired. However, what I want to know is what would you be willing to do for the honor of my daughter’s hand?”

The odd phrasing of his question brought up Michael’s guard. “I’m not certain I understand your meaning, sir. If you are questioning my devotion, let me assure you I remain as steadfast in my commitment to Ivy as I was before I left for the war.”

“Ah, yes, commitment,” Sir William echoed with a funny little hum in his voice. He paused and looked to his daughter. “My dear, would you please ask Norell to send

in some refreshments for our guest and give us a moment alone.”

“Yes, Papa,” Ivy replied, her relief apparent at being given a reprieve from the conversation. She dutifully hurried from the room, shutting the door behind her.

Michael sensed there was something odd going on. Nor did he trust Sir William’s smile. “What do you want?”

Sir William laughed. “I admire directness, Colonel. Please sit down.”

“Perhaps you should tell me what you wish first.”

“A favor—nothing more, nothing less. And in the end, if all goes well, I may grant your request for my daughter’s hand.”

Michael sat.

Taking the chair next to his, Sir William

said good-naturedly, “Don’t appear so uneasy, sir. I want you to marry my daughter.”

“But . . .?” he prodded.

Sir William gave a worried sigh and dropped his gaze to his hands in his lap. “But I have a small problem I was hoping you could resolve for me. You see, I have been robbed and I need to have my goods returned to me.”

“If you’ve been robbed, call the magistrate.”

Sir William shook his head. “The case is too delicate for a public hearing.”

“Then hire a Bow Street Runner.”

Sir William rested his elbow on the chair arm and stroked his chin for a moment before saying, “I may have made a mistake.

I'd thought you wished to marry my daughter and could help me, you know, as a family member would. Ah, well, I can see I may have made an error in judgment."

He started to rise. Michael leaned forward. "What do you want me to do?"

"Not very much," Sir William said, sitting back down. "I have been on the verge of an important discovery utilizing the properties of a substance called rubber."

"The stuff of a child's ball?"

"The same. However, it could have vast and important uses. My idea was to use it to make fabric waterproof. Imagine the implications. But I am in danger of having all my careful work stolen from me. I need someone resourceful like yourself to fetch a copy of the formula from the pirates who

would claim my work as theirs. It will call for a bit of subterfuge.”

Michael lifted an eyebrow. “Subterfuge?”

“A disguise. The Royal Society is a very touchy group. I would not want my name connected with the formula’s disappearance. I believe you can understand my actions could be misconstrued by those eager to discredit me.”

Something was not right. Michael was not surprised Sir William was puffed up over his own consequence. Every ounce of common sense Michael possessed warned him to get up and leave.

As if seeing the direction of Michael’s thoughts, Sir William said, “A young viscount has been calling on Ivy. Good man.

Excellent background, five thousand a year. You may know him, Thorpeton? My daughter could do no better.”

“But she promised herself to me,” Michael said.

“Years ago, Colonel. And what is the promise of a young girl without her father’s consent?” he asked rhetorically. “Absence does not always make the heart grow fonder. My daughter is as practical as she is vain. She would like to be a viscountess. However, a word from me could make the difference.”

Michael drew back. “Am I being blackmailed?”

“Blackmail? No. Consider this more a quest, like Jason in search of the Golden Fleece.”

“Golden Fleece?”

Sir William leaned forward. “Make no mistake about this, Colonel, the formula could be worth a fortune . . . for both of us.”

At that moment, there was a light knock at the door and Ivy entered without waiting for a summons. Michael came to his feet. She closed the door and looked to her father. “Will Michael help us, Papa?”

“He has not said.”

Her gaze flew to Michael and he sensed for the first time that she really saw him since he’d returned from the Continent. “You must help us. There is no one else we can ask.”

She was so beautiful. He could not bear the thought of her going to another man. Not after he had sacrificed for her over all these

years. He'd grown up in a large, gregarious but ambitious family where, as the youngest, he was often an afterthought. Ivy's attention had made him feel special and given his life purpose.

"If I do as you ask," he said carefully, his eyes on Ivy but his words directed to her father, "will you consent to our marriage?"

"Absolutely," Sir William replied. "With a healthy dowry and my blessings. Why, you could be married within the fortnight if you are quick about the matter. I'd even purchase the special license."

Ivy looked away, becoming color staining her cheeks. She was as soft and submissive as a houri. He had the urge to protect her, even as he suspected he was being manipulated.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

Sir William smiled. “I need you to go to Wye, a small village on the river Avon. Geoffrey Kenyon lives there, an inferior scientist who makes his living off the backs of other people’s work. He has a formula that I suspect is mine.”

Michael tore his gaze away from Ivy. “How did he get the formula in the first place?”

His expression bitter, Sir William said, “Through a mutual friend, one whom I trusted. He sent it to Kenyon claiming my work as his own and refuses to discuss the matter with me. His credit is better with the Royal Society and he knows it would be his word against mine.”

“Why don’t you just write the formula

down again?”

Sir William threw his hands up. “Does every housewife remember her recipe for cake? I wrote it down, but misplaced the scrap of paper. I’d have to start over again.”

Ivy took a step forward and placed her hand on Michael’s arm. “Please, help my father.”

Michael felt a bit dizzy when she stood so close, especially when her breasts brushed his shoulder. And there was his family, none of whom was as wild about Ivy as he. He did not want to lose her so they could say I told you so. “What will I have to do?”

“How do you feel about pretending to be a tea merchant?” Sir William responded.

“A tea merchant? A peddler?” Michael

almost spit out the words. “I’d rather be a rat catcher.”

“A peddler is the perfect disguise,” Sir William said. “I’ve been thinking on this. As a tea merchant you can go all over the countryside without anyone being the wiser. I’ve even thought of a name for you. Donaldson. Michael Donaldson. Very nondescript.”

“I’d rather walk up to Kenyon’s door and demand the formula back.”

Sir William came to his feet with a frustrated sound. “He won’t give it to you—and he might even destroy it rather than face its loss or the public humiliation. If he does, we all lose. No, you must steal the formula and a tea merchant is a very good disguise.”

Michael did not trust him, not at all. Then,

he thought of the sacrifices he'd already made for Ivy—of the hardships, the battles, the witnessing of the deaths of good men. He was ready for home and hearth.

Compared to what he'd already done to win her, peddling tea would be easy.

He swung his gaze to Sir William. "I'll retrieve your formula. But, while I'm gone, you must keep her safe—for me."

Sir William did not mistake his meaning. He understood Michael expected him to keep the other suitors at bay. "Consider it done," he said. "When you return with my formula we shall have a wedding that will leave all London talking. Is that not right, daughter?"

Ivy's face had gone pale but she nodded her head. Michael wanted a moment alone

with her. He wanted to hear the promise from *her* lips. But it was not to be. Sir William took over, refining his scheme and embellishing it.

The next morning, Michael exchanged his uniform for an ill-fitting coat and valise containing an assortment of East Indian teas for sale to the discriminating country housewife. He set off for Wye and the strangest adventure of his life.

Chapter Two



Miss Kenyon's Need for a Dark Stranger

Jocelyn Kenyon charged into her dearest friend Lucy Lettman's kitchen the moment Lucy answered the knock on her kitchen door. Without waiting for a greeting, Jocelyn declared, "This is the worst day of my life and Uncle Geoffrey is completely oblivious."

She yanked at the ribbons of her bonnet, her fingers shaking so hard she couldn't untie the knot. Exasperated, she quit the struggle and pulled a heavy vellum envelope addressed to herself and her uncle out of the pocket of her dress. "Did you

receive one of these?” It was an invitation from Lord Vaughn to attend a ball in honor of his daughter Elfreda’s betrothal to Thomas Burkhardt.

Lucy closed the door before admitting, “Yes, I did. I’m afraid, dear, one was sent to everyone in Wye. Lord Vaughn is determined to make this the social event of the parish.”

“That means I *must* be there,” Jocelyn whispered and felt her knees go wobbly. She walked down the hall of Lucy’s house and into the comfortable sitting room where a cheery fire blazed in the hearth, but she could not feel its warmth. Everything inside of her was cold with the certainty of complete humiliation.

Lucy put her arm around Jocelyn’s

shoulders. “Jocelyn, we all understand—”

“Yes, I know.” She stepped out of her friend’s comforting embrace and slipped her finger between the ribbons. This time, the knot gave way gracefully. She pulled her bonnet off her head, for once not caring about the springiness of her curls. “Everyone *understands*, and everyone *pities* me. For the past six months it’s been ‘poor Jocelyn, what shall she do?’ Don’t pretend it hasn’t been, Lucy. I know people have been discussing me over their teacups. Of course, the gossip was worse in the beginning when Thomas started paying marked attention to Lady Elfreda, but once he’d jilted me—” She broke off, afraid she might give way to tears and she’d already shed too many.

Thomas had been the love of her life. He'd been by her side since the day she'd first met him sixteen years ago. She'd been eight; he was ten. Her parents had died and she'd been shipped off to Wye to live with an uncle she'd never met. Thomas's friendship had eased the transition. He'd made her feel accepted and she'd idolized him. Around the parish, it had been a foregone conclusion they would marry . . . someday. Neither one of them had been in a hurry.

But then Elfreda had returned after years spent in London and had started taking part in the parish social circles. She was everything Jocelyn wasn't—tall, blond, sophisticated, *wealthy*. She'd stolen Thomas's heart as easily as a child throws a

ball.

The whole parish had been a little surprised Lord Vaughn had approved of the match, but then Elfreda wasn't his oldest daughter. She was the middle of seven and he liked Thomas, a farmer with his own land. He'd even sent Thomas to London to get what he'd called "Town bronze" and now Thomas was back and the betrothal would be announced.

"What am I going to do, Lucy? Everyone will notice if I'm not there. And if I do go to the ball, it'll break my heart to see him and Elfreda together."

Lucy hugged her tightly. "You must make the best of it, Joss. You must hang on to your pride and not let him see how much he has hurt you."

“I don’t know if I can.” She stuffed the invitation back into her pocket and tossed her bonnet into a straight backed chair before walking over to the window. Folding her arms, she leaned against the sill, looking outside but not truly registering the flowering lilac in Lucy’s small garden or the farmer out on the road who drove his oxen toward the village.

Wye was as picturesque a spot as any in England. Its streets and paths were nestled among rolling green hills dotted with fat sheep and along the curving banks of the Avon. Some poet had once described the village as “a piece of heaven on earth.” Jocelyn agreed with the assessment. This was her home.

“It was easier when Thomas was away,”

she said quietly. “I could pretend nothing had changed. Now I hear they will be living at her father’s estate. I’ll see him every day for the rest of my life.”

She faced her friend. “It’s not right that Lady Elfreda shows up after years away and *steals* him from me. He was mine.”

“He was,” Lucy reiterated sadly. “Joss, you are going to have to live with this. I know you can’t see beyond this moment, but someday there will be someone else in your life.”

“Not like Thomas.”

“No, better.”

Now, Lucy was wishing on stars. Jocelyn rolled her eyes. “Who? Billy Fletcher?” Billy was the miller’s son and the only eligible bachelor of her age available. A

more pompous, lazy man could not be found. He had bad breath and overlarge ears. She pushed away from the window. "I'm four and twenty and I have no dowry. If someone doesn't marry me for love then I shall not be married at all. And Thomas loved me," she said with conviction. "I don't know what spell Lady Elfreda cast over him, but *he loved me*."

Lucy sat on the edge of the rocker by the hearth. She placed her hands together as if in prayer and said, "We all thought he did. However, Joss, he left you. How much could he love you to have been so fickle?"

Here was a touchy question and not one Jocelyn wanted to explore too deeply . . . because it didn't cast Thomas in a very good light. "It's Lady Elfreda's fault," she

insisted. “One day, he will wake up and realize how unhappy he is. I only hope it’s not too late. And I just wish there was *something* I could do to let him know how deeply he has hurt me.”

“Like make him jealous?”

There was a good suggestion. “Yes, and why not?” Jocelyn stirred with interest. This idea had merit and would earn her a bit of her own back. She walked the perimeter of the room, working out the details in her mind. “If I could find a more handsome and taller man than Thomas, then I would have no difficulty attending the ball. Can you not picture the scene now, Lucy? I enter the ballroom on the arm of a man, one who is not Billy Fletcher, and conversation stops. Why, the whole parish would be struck

mute with curiosity.” She straightened, poised, acting out the part. “All eyes are on me and this handsome gentleman, who has appeared out of nowhere and apparently has swept me off my feet.”

“Oh, this is good,” Lucy said, leaning back in the rocker to enjoy the story.

“Ummmmhmmm,” Jocelyn agreed, involved in her scene. “Thomas won’t notice us at first. He’ll be too busy talking to Elfreda, but he shall hear the quiet—”

“You can’t hear quiet—”

“Shhh,” Jocelyn returned. “He senses something is different in the air.”

“Better.”

“I think so, too.” Jocelyn directed her hand to point out where Thomas is standing. “He looks up, puzzled. Lady Elfreda is still

talking—like she always is. She likes hearing words come out of her mouth. But he isn't attending. Instead, he slowly turns toward the door where I am standing. I'm wearing my yellow muslin with the embroidery around the trim."

"That's my favorite dress on you."

"I like it, too. And so does Thomas." She smiled, liking this dream. "At first, Thomas will be riveted by my beauty." She smiled to herself over that one.

"You *are* beautiful," Lucy insisted.

Jocelyn lifted one of her dark unruly curls and snorted. "Yes, I have beaux lining up to write poems to my shoe size."

"Joss—!" Lucy started to protest, but Jocelyn didn't want to argue. She wanted to dream.

“Anyway, Thomas is riveted and then his gaze shifts.” She snapped her head comically to demonstrate. Lucy laughed as Jocelyn knew she would. “He notices I am not alone. I have my handsome, broad-shouldered escort beside me. A dark stranger with smoldering looks and sensual lips.”

“Sensual lips? Good for you,” Lucy said.

“Yes, good for me . . . because Thomas is overcome with jealousy. He’s *green* with jealousy.” Jocelyn paused dramatically and then said softly, “And *crippled* by remorse because he thinks he has lost me.” She could see his expression in her mind and sighed . . . and then, to her horror, tears threatened because it was never to be.

Lucy came to her feet. “Joss, please

don't cry. And come down from the clouds. Thomas doesn't deserve you. The banns will be posted starting the Sunday after the ball and I say good riddance."

"I wish I could." Jocelyn walked over to the hearth. "Just like I wish I was taller and had blue eyes and straight blond hair. I wish I could make Thomas jealous and then he'd see that marrying Lady Elfreda will be the worst mistake of his life."

"I think you'd best be careful what you wish for." Lucy crossed over and placed her hands on Jocelyn's shoulders. Looking her squarely in the eye, she spoke slowly and distinctly. "I love you like a sister. You are my dearest friend and I would not say this to hurt you, but, Joss, sometimes you refuse to see the world the way it really is."

Thomas is with another woman. You must go on with your life. I want you to make him jealous because I want you to start living again. There is someone out there for you. Someone who will love you better.”

“No, Lucy, I love him.”

Lucy groaned her frustration, throwing her hands up in the air. “Why am I arguing?” She shook her head. “First things first. We need to find a suitable escort for you to Lord Vaughn’s ball.”

“Not Billy Fletcher,” Jocelyn was quick to say.

“No, not Billy Fletcher, but perhaps Kent knows someone.” Lucy referred to her husband, Lord Vaughn’s land manager and a very good man. “He might know someone outside the parish . . . or there is his cousin

Simon—”

“Simon is seventeen.”

“Oh, he is, isn’t he? He looks older.” Lucy made a face. “This isn’t very promising.”

Jocelyn took pity on her friend. “It’s not your fault or your worry. I mean, I won’t mind being a spinster. I have Uncle Geoffrey to take care of and maybe I can cultivate a hobby or two and start taking in cats.”

“A hobby like what?” Lucy asked, suspicious of Jocelyn’s motives.

“Pi-geons,” Jocelyn said, breaking the word into two syllables.

A gleam appeared in Lucy’s eye. She knew Jocelyn was teasing. “Pigeons?”

“Oh, yes, I shall raise pigeons. Perhaps

I'll write an article or two and submit them to my uncle's scientific journals. I shall be the Pigeon Woman of Wye and people will come from far and wide to hear me speak and I'll wear a big rose and gray hat and pontificate like the Clark sisters do for hours and hours."

"I'm almost willing to let you do it to see how it all turns out," Lucy said. "Cats and pigeons! But be serious, Jocelyn. You are still too young to place yourself on the shelf." A knock sounded at the front door. She started out of the room, throwing over her shoulder, "And losing you to another man, one worthy of your affections, will make Thomas good and sorry." She opened the front door.

Jocelyn had to agree. She wouldn't mind

seeing Thomas grovel in apologies—

Lucy's swallowed gasp of surprise interrupted her thoughts of a groveling Thomas. Her friend stepped away from the door, her eyes as round as saucers.

Alarmed, Jocelyn moved forward, then stopped midstep when she heard a deep, well-modulated male voice say, "Good afternoon, I'm looking for Mrs. Lettman."

Lucy raised a distracted hand up to her hair. "I'm she," she said. Jocelyn had never seen such a silly female smile on her friend's face. "Please come in."

The man entered, removing his hat as he stepped through the door—and for a second, all Jocelyn, too, could do was gawk.

His tall, broad-shouldered frame filled

the narrow vestibule. His hair was thick and wavy and so black it almost appeared blue. His jaw was strong, determined, reinforcing his air of authority.

And he had sensual lips.

“I’m Michael Donaldson, a tea merchant. They told me in the village you had a room to let.” He introduced himself as if reciting by rote and Jocelyn had the strange feeling he was decidedly uncomfortable.

“My husband and I do rent out a room on occasion,” Lucy said. “Please, come in.” She motioned him toward the sitting room where Jocelyn stood.

Mr. Donaldson had to duck to come in through the low doorway. But what caught Jocelyn’s interest was the grace with which he moved. Here was a man who was all

hard muscle, a natural athlete. He would be as at home on a horse as he would on a dance floor. Never in a million years would she have guessed what he did to earn his living.

Then he looked directly at her—and time stopped. He was a handsome man with his square jaw and long nose, but what held her mesmerized were his eyes. They were silver and as bright and full of intelligence as any she'd ever seen. Even the dust of the road, which showed he'd traveled a good distance, could not diminish the presence of those eyes.

Jocelyn was aware she was staring and quickly shut her mouth. Lucy, standing behind him, caught her eye. With a wave of her hands, she mouthed the words “this is

the one.”

The One. The dark stranger. The man who could make Thomas jealous.

Escape was Jocelyn’s first thought. It was one thing to laugh and pretend. It was entirely another to believe such a scheme could be put into effect.

Unfortunately, Mr. Donaldson and Lucy blocked her path.

“Mr. Donaldson, this is my friend, *Miss Kenyon*,” Lucy said to Jocelyn’s undying mortification.

“Kenyon?” Mr. Donaldson’s sharp gaze homed in on her like a beam of light and she sensed he didn’t miss any detail.

The time had definitely come to leave. There was something about this man that unsettled her. He was too handsome, too

big, too everything. She snatched her bonnet up from the chair. "Well, I must be going—"

"It is a pleasure to meet you," he said, blocking her exit. He offered his hand.

"And I you," Jocelyn murmured, reluctant to take his hand. Something was not right. Jocelyn sensed it. For one, the name Donaldson didn't seem to fit him. It was too common and this man was anything but. And secondly, he stirred something deep within her. It was becoming hard to breathe naturally. She was sensitive to the bay rum in his shaving soap and her heart beat as if she'd run a fast race. She took a step toward the door. "I hope you enjoy your stay in Wye. Now, if you will excuse me—"

Once again he placed himself in her

escape route. “Do you drink tea, Miss Kenyon? I could show you some of my wares.”

Something about his offering to display his wares set her body on fire . . . a condition not lost on Lucy, who fairly danced with laughter. She came around to saucily hook her arm in Jocelyn’s, forcing her to stay. “Tell me, Mr. Donaldson,” Lucy said with the easy frankness of a married woman, “how long will you need the room?”

He tore his attention from Jocelyn. “A few days. No more than a week.”

He would be here for Lord Vaughn’s ball. Jocelyn could almost hear the words ringing in Lucy’s matchmaking head. “No,” she warned, the sound low.

Lucy ignored her. “Do you dance, sir?”

Jocelyn could have died of embarrassment—and she couldn't slip her arm free without prying off Lucy's hold.

He was startled by the question. Now, *he* was the one to back up. "Is it a requirement to rent the room?"

"Oh no," Lucy answered. "But there is a dance going on this Friday in the parish. Since you will be available . . . well, we can always do with another bachelor."

"My uncle is expecting me to be home," Jocelyn said pointedly. "If you will excuse me?" She attempted to twist her arm free.

Lucy refused to let go. "You will come to dinner tonight, won't you, Jocelyn?" she asked. "And you, Mr. Donaldson, dinner is included in your room rate. We'll make it a happy party!"

“Unfortunately, I won’t be there,” Jocelyn said, finally managing to pull her arm free. She edged toward the door. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Donaldson.”

And she would have made her escape but for Lucy following her into the vestibule and fiercely whispering in her ear, “You *must* come tonight. Can you not see? The man is gorgeous and he is interested in you.”

“He barely noticed me.”

“He’s staring at you right *now*,” Lucy said—and she was right. He was watching her closely, his head tilted as if trying to hear what they were saying. “Dinner. Tonight,” Lucy ordered and did not wait for a yes or no. Instead, she swept Jocelyn out the door and returned to her new boarder.

Jocelyn stood on the front step, lost in indecision. She could hear Lucy trill her welcome to the tea peddler. The very *handsome* tea peddler. “Oh, dear,” she muttered and, putting on her bonnet, went on her way, knowing she had no choice but to return for dinner.



From the sitting room’s front window, Michael watched Miss Kenyon turn at the end of the walk and head in the direction of her home.

How fortunate for him to have stumbled upon a link to Geoffrey Kenyon so quickly. Especially such a fetching link.

Funny, but he’d been so devoted to Ivy he’d not really noticed many other women

—but he'd been instantly attracted to Miss Kenyon and he wasn't certain why.

She was pretty enough, with her lively brown curls and clear dark eyes, but what had caught his interest was the air about her, a vivacity, an earnestness for living. Funny, he'd never noticed such a thing in anyone before, but he definitely felt its presence with Miss Kenyon.

She hadn't believed his story. She wasn't one to hide her thoughts, and she had doubts about him, he'd seen it in her eyes. Her friend Mrs. Lettman had upset her and he wondered why.

His question was answered when Mrs. Lettman said, "I have an offer to make, sir, one I hope you won't think me too bold for suggesting."

Michael turned from the window. Her smile was open and friendly and he found himself liking her. In fact, everything about the village of Wye impressed him. It was like coming home. A man tired of war could make a good life in such a place.

“What kind of offer?” he asked.

“I’m willing to waive the charge for your room for the week if you will escort my friend Miss Kenyon to the ball this coming Friday night.”

She then proceeded to tell him the whole story of an unfaithful lover and a scheme to make the lad jealous.

Chapter Three



A Faithless Lover Receives a Taste of His Own

Thomas Burkhardt was a man who should have been completely happy.

After all, his betrothal to Lady Elfreda was quite an accomplishment. She was beautiful with a substantial dowry and her father was the most generous of men. The lads down at the local pub, the Rooster's Den, all envied him and even the squire treated him with new respect.

Furthermore, his mother—not always the easiest woman to satisfy—was very, very pleased.

The only person who wasn't completely

certain about this marriage was himself.

Yes, Elfreda was lovely, and she was kind and good. But she was also a little dim.

There, he'd finally admitted it to himself. In the beginning, he'd been so flattered by her marked attention, he had overlooked the fact that she didn't always catch the humor in his jokes or know anything about farming, horses, or hunting—his three main interests.

She was so lovely, he'd dismissed his suspicions that she was usually a bit confused in conversations about anything other than fashion and hairstyles . . . and she wasn't really very practical. For a while, he'd felt protective of her. However, three weeks in London with her family had opened his eyes and almost driven him up a wall.

Short of himself, little interested Elfreda. He didn't mind being the whole sum and focus of her attention, but it grew tiresome. She rarely let him out of her sight—this trip out for a ride being an unusual exception—and he didn't fit into her social circle in London. Not at all.

So he was caught in a dilemma. If he backed out of this betrothal, even before it was announced, well, the matter could get sticky. And there would be the problem of hurting Elfreda, whom he genuinely cared for. But over the past weeks away from Wye, he'd realized she wasn't Jocelyn. The good people of Wye might not forgive him a second jilting.

Lord Vaughn certainly wouldn't.

As if his mind had conjured her, Jocelyn

appeared at the edge of the field where Thomas sat on his horse. She was obviously taking the shortcut on her way home from Lucy's, as she had hundreds of times before. They had met here often over the years.

She'd removed her bonnet, which she swung by its ribbons. The afternoon sun caught the shine in her tangle of curls that no amount of brushing could tame. Her cheeks glowed with good health and brought out the sparkle in her eyes. She batted the head of a weed that had grown overtall and then jumped over a dry rivulet formed by rain in the field.

He knew the moment she caught sight of him waiting for her in the line of trees outlining the border of his land from her uncle's. Her step slowed, then halted. He

nudged his horse forward. The animal was a gift from Lord Vaughn, a beautiful gelding of which Thomas had grown very fond. As he drew closer, he couldn't help but notice Jocelyn wasn't wearing gloves.

Elfreda never went anywhere without gloves.

He reined in the gelding a few feet from where she stood. Their gazes met and he spoke first, "Hello, Jocelyn."

She pressed her lips together, refusing to speak. *Damn*, he'd hoped she wasn't going to be like this, that her heart had softened toward him. Instead, tears pooled in her eyes and she looked away.

For the first time, he realized how deeply he had hurt her. He'd been so caught up in the excitement of having a lord's daughter

single him out, he hadn't been as kind as he should have been to Jocelyn. He'd even convinced himself that they could still be friends. Now, he wasn't so certain.

Then, with the pluck he had expected of her, she hardened her gaze and met his. "Hello, Thomas." She started to walk right by him, her head high. He noticed she didn't "float" when she walked, like Elfreda did. No, hers was the good honest pace of a real person. He pushed his horse to fall into step beside her.

But what did he have to say? Once, conversation had always been easy between them. Now, he felt awkward.

And then the right words flew out of his mouth without conscious thought and he understood why he'd come here this day,

this moment. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

She stopped. Her nose twitched with expectancy.

"It was never my intent," he said.

She nodded. She knew. Then in a voice that was barely a whisper she said, "I thought you loved me."

Oh God. Words choked in his throat.

What was worse was seeing the disappointment in her eyes when he didn't speak. But then, what could he say?

Her chin came up. "I'll manage without you, Thomas. Don't feel guilty on my account. I will see you at the ball."

"Perhaps we can have a dance," he suggested, knowing it was a terrible idea. Elfreda would be distraught if he paid attention to any other woman.

She pulled the gaily colored ribbons of her bonnet through her fingers. “I don’t know. You’ve been gone some time, down in London and all. Things have changed.”

“In what way?” Wye had appeared the same upon his return as when he’d left.

“I, too, have found someone else. He will be escorting my uncle and me to the ball.”

If Jocelyn had hit him over the head with an axe handle he could not have been more surprised. She had a suitor? Another man had taken his place?

Thomas couldn’t speak. He was too shocked that she’d actually found someone else. Or that he’d been back five days and no one had told him Jocelyn had a caller, not even the lads at the Rooster’s Den.

She smiled, a gleam of triumph in her eyes, revealing she knew exactly what he was thinking. "I shall see you Friday night." She practically sang the words to him, before turning and marching toward the trees and out of sight.

Stunned, Thomas sat for a long time until his fancy new gelding shifted his weight and let him know it was time to either travel on or get off his back.

Setting his heels to the horse, one question consumed Thomas's imagination: who was Jocelyn's new suitor?

He knew he wouldn't rest until he found out.

Chapter Four



The Die Is Cast

Once out of Thomas's sight, Jocelyn lifted her skirts and ran home.

She'd done it!

She'd given him a bit of his own back and the expression on his face had been priceless.

She reached her uncle's house, a brick manor set well back from the road. Running inside, she slammed the door and holding her bonnet in one hand, she fell against it, pressing her other hand against her stomach.

What had she done?

Her initial triumph faded as she realized she'd backed herself into a corner, all for

the price of pride. Now she had no choice but to bring Mr. Donaldson up to scratch. He *had* to escort her Friday night or she'd be thoroughly humiliated.

Fear rattled her nerves . . . but there was also a sense of anticipation. Lucy was a well-known schemer, especially when it came to matters of the heart. More than one couple in Wye owed their marriage to her matchmaking abilities. Chances are she'd already made arrangements.

"Josie, is that you?" Her uncle Geoffrey came out of his laboratory, a study converted to his scientific needs located in the back of the house. He walked down the hall toward her.

He was a dear, gentle man with a slight build and a bushy head of silver-gray hair

always in need of a trim. He paused, concern in his eyes. “You look pale. Has something happened?”

Jocelyn hung her bonnet on a hook by the door. When Uncle Geoffrey worried, he couldn't work and she'd learned long ago how important work was to him. Consequently, she was in the habit of taking care of her own problems. Not that he wouldn't have done anything for her. He would. He just wasn't very effective when it came to dealing with people and their feelings.

“Everything is fine,” she quickly assured him. “I ran the distance from the pasture, racing myself.”

He wasn't convinced. Searching her face, he said, “I hear young Thomas is back from

London.”

Jocelyn was surprised. He usually seemed oblivious to the doings around the village. “Yes, he has returned.”

Uncle Geoff’s gaze narrowed. “He’s a fool. You are a fine catch, Josie. He shouldn’t have chosen a hothouse *Liliaceae* like Lady Elfreda over a native *Rosaceae* like yourself.”

A gardener herself and long used to her uncle’s habit of referring to plants by their Latin names, Jocelyn knew he was comparing lilies to roses. “That is the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me, Uncle Geoff.”

He blushed as if he’d said too much. “I know I’m not the type of parent you should have had. If my brother and his wife had lived you would have gotten much more of

what you needed.”

She put her arms around him. “You’ve given me everything I’ve needed.”

“I’m a cranky old man,” he corrected. “And I know the reason you didn’t marry Thomas years ago is because I got sick. Not to mention the fact, his mother and I never rubbed each other well.”

“She is a bit of a dragon.”

“She’s a snob.”

Jocelyn grinned. “At least we haven’t blown up the house in a good six months, so she can’t drum up support in the village against us.” She spoke of a time when her uncle had been experimenting with gunpowder. Jocelyn had become very good at putting out small fires.

He laughed as she knew he would. She

changed the subject. "Lucy has asked me to join them for dinner this evening." She hesitated. "There will be a gentleman there they wish to introduce to me." Another pause. "I've met him before—" Which was true. "—Although, I'm certain if you wish to meet him, Lucy would add another setting."

Her uncle visibly shivered in horror. He hated to go out, especially when he was intensely involved in a problem. "I'm sure all will be fine," he said. "Kent can see you home. I'm so close to stabilizing the properties of rubber. Very tricky it is. I've almost gotten it." He took a step back toward his laboratory, his mind already shifting from her concerns to the scientific world.

Jocelyn thought about the invitation in her

skirt pocket. She pulled it out and silently handed it to him. "Please, you must come."

He read the script and nodded. "Of course, of course. Must be there for you." He paused and then added, "Will we have to stay more than an hour?"

"We don't have to do anything we don't want to," she told him grandly, and he took solace from the idea. "Well, must get back. I left four grams of rubber cooling and must measure the temperature."

"And I'd best go dress for Lucy's. I'll slice some of the chicken we had for lunch for your dinner."

He nodded absently. His mind had already returned to his experiments. "I'll see you later?"

"Yes, Uncle," she replied dutifully and

watched him walk down the hall. She hadn't known he blamed her not marrying on his sickness. It had been true she had put Thomas off . . . but she did not regret her actions. Uncle Geoff was the only family she had and she loved him with a fierce loyalty. She'd not let anything happen to him.

On that thought, she went upstairs to her bedroom to dress for dinner.

Chapter Five



My Lady Elfreda

Elfreda didn't know what she was going to do. Yesterday, Thomas had promised he'd be over for a visit. Instead, she learned from her footman, Thomas had been seen out riding instead.

She knew for what purpose. He had gone in search of Jocelyn Kenyon.

In London, everything had been wonderful between her and Thomas. However, since they had returned to Wye, he'd grown unusually quiet.

Her father told her not to worry. All prospective bridegrooms got cold feet.

But she had to worry. She loved Thomas

Burkhardt more than any other thing in the world and she feared she could not keep him.

Elfreda had no illusions about herself. She knew she didn't have much to recommend her beyond her looks. Her sisters were much brighter than she and far more ambitious. All she'd ever wanted, all she'd ever *let* herself want, was Thomas.

If he started drifting away, if he was thinking about Jocelyn, Elfreda didn't know what she was going to do. However, she did know she'd fight to her last breath before she'd lose him—and Jocelyn had better beware.

Chapter Six



The Rogue in the Garden

Michael could not believe his good fortune. Mrs. Lettman's scheme played right into his plans.

Of course he would escort Miss Kenyon to the ball. In truth, he sympathized with her plight. He knew the pain of unrequited love. Was he not on this fool's errand to win Ivy's heart? Helping Miss Kenyon to put this Burkhardt's nose out of joint would also pacify Michael's uneasiness over stealing the formula.

There was one wrinkle to Mrs. Lettman's matchmaking scheme and it came from her husband's innate good sense and honesty.

Kent had a ruddy face with curling blond hair. Both he and Michael got on well with each other right from the beginning, quickly switching to the informality of using their Christian names. Nor was Kent one to mince words.

“You should stay out of Jocelyn’s affairs, especially on this one,” Kent told his wife.

“I can’t. She is so unhappy.”

“I know she is and Burkhardt is a rogue for jilting her, but better the truth than having Michael here pretend to be an admirer.”

“He’s escorting her to a dance,” his wife said with a great show of patience. “Nothing more, nothing less. If Thomas realizes he is truly in love with Jocelyn because of Michael’s presence, that is no fault of mine.”

Her husband rolled his eyes in patent

disbelief. He addressed Michael. “And you think this wise? I’ll warn you now, while other women stitch or paint, Lucy matchmakes.”

“Very successfully,” she added.

Kent grunted a response. “Two couples have married. The other three can’t stand the sight of each other.”

“Those are good odds,” Lucy announced and her husband gave her a pat on the behind, which he didn’t think Michael saw, for her impertinence.

Michael liked the playfulness of the couple. They reminded him of his older siblings and their spouses. Even his parents, who were very much in love after almost forty years of marriage, engaged in loving banter. He’d once imagined he and Ivy

taking part in the same sort of teasing; however, now he realized the Incomparable she had become lacked the air of earthiness one needed to enjoy this type of closeness.

He pushed aside his reservations over Ivy and answered Kent. "It's a country dance. What harm can come of my escorting her? Miss Kenyon seems a nice person and I wouldn't mind tweaking the nose of the man who hurt her."

"I'd like to give Burkhardt a fist in his face," Kent agreed. "He used to be a good one but now, he's a bit full of himself And you are right about Jocelyn. She's an angel with a bit of the devil in her."

At the same moment, there was a knock on the door. Miss Kenyon had arrived, coming to the kitchen as friends of long

acquaintance were wont to do. She'd changed from the serviceable day dress she'd been wearing that afternoon into a gown of robin's egg blue with a pair of cream gloves and a matching shawl. The dress style was simple and the color suited her. She'd threaded ribbon of the same soft blue through her curls and the effect was lovely.

Michael was startled to realize she used no artifice of any sort—no hairpieces, no cosmetics, no perfumes. Her scent was the freshness of the evening air and when she entered the house it immediately filled with her own special sparkle. He'd never met a woman with such presence.

They sat down to a simple, yet delicious dinner. The Lettman's home was a cozy

dwelling—the dining room was really not much more than an alcove—and Michael enjoyed not having the fuss of servants. There was ample room at the table and the conversation and laughter flowed easily among all of them.

Michael had not taken time to go home and visit his family when he'd returned from France for two reasons, the first being his eagerness to see Ivy and claim her hand. The second was that ever since his oldest brother had accused him of arrogance in his pursuit of Ivy, there had been some estrangement. His brother had been the only family member brave enough to suggest Michael was too single-minded on the subject of Ivy. Angered, Michael had left for the army and not looked back. Nor had

he made many friends in the military. He'd been too ambitious and, to some, too foolhardy in the risks he took for the sake of advancement.

Now as he found enjoyment in the companionship of new friends, Michael understood a bit of what his brother had been trying to say. Ivy was not a person who valued the genuine warmth of family and friends and this evening was showing Michael how much he did.

At the table, Miss Kenyon sat across from him. Without thinking, his long legs took up most of the space. Once or twice, his boot would accidentally bump the toe of her slipper.

The first time he did it, she moved her foot. The second, she kept her foot where it

was, a gleam in her eye issuing a territorial challenge.

Charmed, Michael tapped his foot twice, watching her closely across the table and pleased to see a sign of humor in her eyes. She lifted his toe up with her own, and he pressed down. She pulled her toe back just in time.

A dimple appeared by the corner of her mouth and he couldn't help but smile back.

Lucy stopped her soliloquy on the shortcomings of the vicar. She looked from Miss Kenyon to Michael and back again. "Did I say something funny?"

"No," Miss Kenyon said. "Why would you think so?" She helped herself to more peas.

Their hostess frowned. She looked to

Michael but he wasn't going to admit to playing like children under the table. She changed the subject. "Jocelyn, I've explained all to Michael and he wants to escort you to Lord Vaughn's ball."

A most becoming blush stained Miss Kenyon's cheeks. "You know all, Mr. Donaldson?"

"Should I not have?" Lucy asked alarmed, but Miss Kenyon covered her hand with a reassuring one of her own.

"No, it's best." She looked to Michael. "I appreciate your performing this small favor. I'm certain you are very busy selling tea, but it is kind of you to help."

"I'm honored," Michael replied. "And it will be fun."

Again, their gazes met. How

straightforward and honest she was.

A pity her uncle was a scoundrel. Of course, he shouldn't talk, considering his own subterfuge.

Her expression changed as she reacted to something she heard Lucy say. Michael was so attuned to her, he noticed instantly. He directed his attention to the table conversation as Kent announced proudly, “. . . the baby will be due by next spring.” His wife blushed with pride.

“A baby?” Jocelyn sounded a bit stunned. “Lucy, how wonderful for you, for you both.”

Something in her tone didn't ring true to Michael. He murmured his own congratulations and the dinner proceeded well enough from there with the talk

moving from the baby to land prices to agricultural laws. Michael noticed Miss Kenyon grew unusually subdued. Her friends didn't notice. They were too wrapped up in their own cocoon of happiness.

At the first opportunity, Miss Kenyon did not surprise him when she excused herself. "I must be going home. The hour grows late."

"I'll walk you home," Kent started, but his wife interrupted.

"I'll go, too, and you also, Michael. I'm certain you wouldn't mind seeing Jocelyn home. Would you, sir?"

"Lucy," Miss Kenyon protested.

"I would be honored to see you home," Michael responded eagerly. This would

give him an opportunity to meet Geoffrey Kenyon and scout out the formula without raising anyone's suspicions. These were kind people and the sooner he finished with the formula, the better.

"It's a lovely night for a walk," Lucy said romantically. "Full moon and all." She leveled a speculative look at Michael and Miss Kenyon and he knew she was visualizing them as a match.

Uncomfortable, he forced a smile while silently promising himself he would be very careful to not lead Miss Kenyon on.

There was nothing left to do then but to leave. Miss Kenyon pulled on her gloves and put on her bonnet while Michael picked up his hat. Again, he sensed something was bothering her. However, Lucy and Kent

didn't seem to notice anything wrong.

The two couples set out for their walk. The night truly was marvelous. The air was velvety soft and the moon's blue light softened the hard edges.

A good number of villagers were out and about. Lucy and Kent quickly dropped behind to talk to friends. They were also content to hold hands and whisper to each other, leaving Michael and Miss Kenyon to their own devices.

Seeing that they were alone, Miss Kenyon said, "You shouldn't have to see me home. You've already agreed to escort me to the dance. I fear Lucy is becoming carried away. She hates the sight of an unattached bachelor. You'd best beware." She lengthened her stride, walking with

purpose.

“I don’t mind,” he responded keeping in step beside her. “Besides, it’s a good night for a walk.”

Miss Kenyon did not slow her step. In fact, she almost acted as if she were attempting to escape him. She nodded here and there to people she knew but did not linger to visit.

Michael found her behavior odd. They’d gone about a fifth of a mile, and were well beyond Lucy and Kent, before he hooked his arm in hers and forced her to stop. “Miss Kenyon, what have I done to offend you?”

She blinked in surprise. “Why nothing, Mr. Donaldson.”

“Then why are you trying to outdistance me?”

“I don’t mean to be rude. I was just going home” she announced primly. “I have a fast walk.”

He shook his head, doubting her word. “Something disturbed you when the Lettmans announced their good news about the baby. What is it?”

She wasn’t about to give in easily. “Mr. Donaldson, why should you care?”

“Because I like you, Miss Kenyon.”

His honest answer hung in the air for a moment before she knitted her brows together and confessed, “I am afraid what I was thinking does not say much for my character, sir, and it bothers me greatly.”

“Let me be the judge of that. Please,” he added when she still remained unconvinced. “Sometimes when you share a trouble, it

becomes lighter.”

“You don’t believe that,” she answered. “I sense you are very much a loner.”

Her accuracy caught him by surprise. “What makes you say that?”

“There is a reserve about you. A wall, if you will, that you allow few people to breach.”

Michael shifted his weight, impressed. He didn’t deny it. “What gave me away?”

“No one thing in particular. Call it intuition or that I hazarded a lucky guess. You are accustomed to doing things the way you want to do them.”

He held up his hand, asking for quarter. “I am. But what of you?” Narrowing his eyes thoughtfully, he said, “I sense you are someone who takes friendships seriously.”

“Keen observation there,” she mocked him and started walking down the road, albeit at a slower pace.

Her poke at his remark goaded him into trying harder. He ate the distance between them with his longer legs and stepped in front of her. “All right.” He took a moment, considering her closely and then said, “You are someone who likes to be thought of as independent, but in truth, you are quite vulnerable. And if I had to name one thing you wanted above anything else it would be . . . ” He paused. Here he would have to think harder. Inspiration struck. “I believe what you want most in the world is security or else you wouldn’t be so bound to this Thomas Burkhardt when he is about to offer for another woman.”

She drew in a sharp breath and took a step back. Seeing her reaction, Michael said, “Wait, I didn’t mean to be so personal—”

“No,” she said, cutting him off. “I’m not angry, just struck by the truth of your words. I had not realized . . .” She shook her head. “Did Lucy tell you I was an orphan?”

Now, Michael truly regretted what he’d said. “No, and I am deeply embarrassed.”

She placed her hand on his arm. “Please, do not be. If anything, you have done me a service. I mean, I love Thomas.” She stated the fact as if reminding herself and then said thoughtfully, “However, I’d not pictured myself as clinging to him. It’s not an attractive idea.”

“Miss Kenyon, I don’t know where my words came from. I am not an insightful

person.”

She smiled, the dimple appearing again. “No, just a forthright one—a quality I happen to admire,” she added quickly as if fearing he thought her critical. “There is no value in delusion, or so I keep telling myself. But I do love Thomas.”

Michael wanted to wince. She’d done it again—stating her love like it was a slogan instead of a declaration, but he decided this time to keep his opinion to himself.

Unfortunately, she read his mind. “You don’t understand. I’m certain I pushed him away. As to my earlier annoyance over Lucy,” she said, smoothly changing the subject, “I fear I’m a bit jealous. You see, Lucy is like a sister to me. In the past, I would have been the first to hear all of

Lucy's good news. But tonight, it struck me that her husband is the closest to her now. This afternoon when I saw her, she said nothing to me about the baby. Of course, I was too involved in my own problems, but still . . . one's closest friend should hear first, don't you think?"

"I must side with the husband," Michael admitted.

A flash of annoyance appeared in her eyes. He braced himself but then she said, "Sometimes honesty is a brutal trait." Her anger evaporated, released on a resigned sigh.

"There is no fun in being left behind," she murmured, and he nodded.

"How would you know?" she challenged as they both began walking,

side by side.

Michael was tempted to answer her. To tell her of how lonely he'd felt in London when he'd returned and realized that life had continued on without him. While he'd been off fighting the monster Napoleon, the woman he'd loved, his friends, even his family had gone on peacefully enjoying life. They'd not heard the roar of cannons, seen men torn apart, or feared for their own lives.

Oh, yes, he'd very definitely been an outsider in London. But he couldn't tell her this without revealing his identity.

"They say change is inevitable," he said, a safe noncommittal statement.

Miss Kenyon nodded. "But that doesn't mean I must like it."

Her candor startled a laugh out of him.

He took her arm. “Miss Kenyon, I am so glad I’ve met you. For the past several weeks, I thought *I* was the one out of step with everyone else.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged. He could not tell her his complete tale, but there were parts . . . and why not? She *should* know. “I’m in love with someone—”

She skidded to a halt. “You are not married, are you?” she said with alarm.

“No, heavens no,” he promised and she relaxed slightly, then asked with curiosity, “Is this other woman in love with you? Or does she cause you uncertainty? Is that why you’ve agreed so quickly to aid my cause?”

Michael looked up at the night sky. How

to explain his love for Ivy? “I think she is in love with me. At one time, she was. I love her.”

“Now you sound like me,” Miss Kenyon chided softly.

Michael grunted a response and continued. “In truth, when we first pledged our love, we were very young, but knew our own minds. However, over the years, her affections have—” He paused, suddenly realizing he’d been about to confess a fear he’d not even admitted to himself, a fear Ivy no longer loved him. The realization was unsettling. “She loves me,” he said almost as if convincing himself. “However, I need to win her once and for all. Unfortunately, I’ve agreed to do something foolish and perhaps I’m trying to atone for

my transgression by helping you.”

Miss Kenyon lightly touched his arm, empathy in her eyes. “Love isn’t easy, is it?”

He glanced down at her gloved fingers. “No,” he agreed.

They started walking again, at an even slower pace this time. Michael found it felt good to broach the topic of his doubts over Ivy with someone. He’d kept all this to himself for too long. “My family has never truly admired her and they can’t seem to comprehend my devotion. I’ve changed my life for her. I’ve given everything I have to marry her.”

“Thomas was the first person who accepted me in Wye. We were both children. My parents had just died and I didn’t know my uncle very well. Thomas’s friendship

meant everything to me.” She frowned and added, “Of course, my feelings of being left out are actually jealousy, aren’t they? Humbling thought.”

“I understand all too well.” And he did. Jealousy had eaten him alive in London as he’d watched Ivy flirt with other men. He’d agreed to this fool’s errand out of his jealousy. He saw that now.

And it made him uncomfortable.

They walked on a few more steps and then he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “You say you love Thomas, but do you truly believe he loves you?”

“He must,” Miss Kenyon answered. “We were so close. We could finish each other’s sentences and I always knew what he was thinking. Perhaps my uncle is right. If Uncle

Geoff hadn't taken ill when he did, then I would have married Thomas and all would be well."

"Or perhaps such constant companionship breeds more familiarity than love?"

She didn't like his observation. "We were in love," she said firmly.

"*Were?*"

Even in the moonlight he could see her blush over her mistake. "*Are*" she corrected. "I saw Thomas this afternoon. I told him I had an escort for the ball. He was upset."

Michael shook his head. "If he could so easily promise himself to another, why would you want him back?"

She whirled on him. "Because love means one should forgive. He hurt me, but only

out of his own weakness. Some men turn to jelly in the company of a beautiful woman and Lady Elfreda is beautiful. She also comes with a handsome dowry. If I were in Thomas's shoes, I don't know if I wouldn't choose her over me. However, a love of such long-standing as ours must count for something. Loyalty should have a value."

He didn't know anything about Lady Elfreda's beauty, but Miss Kenyon, standing there in the moonlight and vowing her love, appeared radiant in his eyes. And, yes, loyalty should count for something.

"It does," he agreed quietly. "More than you shall ever know."

She blushed again, hearing the admiration in his voice and this, too, charmed him. Unlike other women, she seemed

completely oblivious to her own special loveliness. “Well, sadly, we will not be able to solve the problems of love in one night. Especially now that I’m home.”

He looked around and saw they’d come to a gate. Geoffrey Kenyon’s home. A long path led to the front door of the brick house. There was no welcoming lantern and inside all was dark. “Are you certain someone is home?”

“My uncle rarely goes out,” she assured him. She opened the gate. “Thank you for walking me home.”

“My pleasure.” Michael found he was reluctant to let her go. He offered his hand. “Good night, Miss Kenyon.”

“Jocelyn,” she corrected. “After sharing such confidences, and since we both seem

to be star-crossed lovers, we have become more than simple acquaintances.”

She was right, and he felt better for having talked to her. He raised her hand to his lips and gave it a light kiss. “Good night, Jocelyn.” He liked the musical sound of her name. “I’m Michael.”

“Good night, Michael.” She gave the tips of his fingers a small squeeze. “And thank you for having the imagination to take part in Lucy’s scheme. It may work.”

“I hope you win your heart’s desire,” he said, meaning the words.

Her eyes crinkled with pleasure. “And may the woman you love see what a gallant and thoughtful gentleman you are.”

Their hands parted, and Michael felt the loss of connection.

Did she?

Her gaze met his, her smile tentative, and then with the grace of a moonlit goddess she turned and hurried up to the door of her house. She gave him one backward glance, a small wave of her hand, and she slipped inside. A second later, he saw the flicker of a candle.

Michael stood for a long, thoughtful moment. He wished Ivy had a touch of Jocelyn's conviction, of her spirit.

Then, he'd be more certain whenever she said she loved him.

He started walking back down the road and came across Kent and Lucy. The three of them returned home but Michael wasn't ready for sleep. His conscience bothered him. He didn't know what impact his stealing

the formula would have on Jocelyn's life, but he feared it could not be good. Furthermore, he'd just spent the whole evening with her and hadn't brought up the subject of her uncle once. There was something about Jocelyn that made him forget his mission.

Nor was he good at subterfuge and Michael decided the sooner he caught the goods on Kenyon the better he would feel.

Tonight was as good as any to scout Kenyon's house.

He stole out of the Lettmans' and made his way back toward Jocelyn's home. Leaving the road and cutting through a pasture, he approached the house, checking for any sign of movement. All was quiet. Both Jocelyn and her uncle were obviously

asleep.

Satisfied, he traveled to the rear of the house and found himself in a moonlit garden. Even at night, it was a lush and beautiful place. A path of crushed shells gleamed in the darkness and there was the scent of newly budded roses and fertile soil in the air. He could imagine Jocelyn here.

Creeping up to the side of the house, he peeped in some windows. Moonlight through the windows allowed him to see a portion of the rooms. He went from one window to another until he saw a desk covered with papers. There was also a table piled high with glass containers and different instruments he could not define. The rest of the room was as dark as Hades. Even with the windows closed there was the peculiar

odor of sulfur and chemicals in the air. This had to be Kenyon's office.

The find made him feel good.

He took a step back, trying to decide what to do next when he heard a footfall behind him. There followed a soft gasp of surprise.

Michael whirled and there stood Jocelyn, still wearing the robin's egg blue dress although she'd taken the ribbons from her hair, which curled down around her shoulders. She'd removed her gloves.

"What are you still doing here, Michael?" she asked.

What the devil was *she* doing wandering around the garden in the dark of the night?

She'd caught him—and he had nothing to say.

The military had taught him the best tactical strategy was always diversion. So Michael did the first and most expedient thing he could think of to take her mind off his damnable snooping.

He swung her around and kissed her.

Chapter Seven



A Full Moon's Lunacy

Jocelyn was shocked. For a second, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't think.

Restless, with a hundred doubts and worries, she'd decided a turn in the garden would ease her mind. She had not expected to find herself waylaid in her own yard, and of all things—kissed by Michael. Why, she'd just been introduced to the man that day!

Even more astounding, she wasn't afraid. She pressed her hands against his shoulders to push him away—except curiosity got the better of her.

Her uncle wasn't the only one willing to

experiment. Jocelyn had never been kissed by any man save Thomas and his had been safe pecks on the cheek and not this all-out assault. Besides, this kiss felt right.

For the briefest of moments, she allowed herself to relax in Michael's arms. His body was rock hard and solid, a far cry from what one would expect from a tea merchant.

From him came a slight hesitation, a hint of surprise.

The kiss changed.

It was as if he, too, were a bit curious. For whatever reason, he pressed the advantage, gently urging her lips to part and accept him. The effect was a bit like swallowing a thimbleful of peach liqueur—it went straight to her head and made her pleasantly dizzy.

Their kiss took on a life of its own. Their

mouths fit together perfectly. His arms around her waist pulled her closer, and she discovered their mouths weren't the only thing that fit together perfectly!

Then, she felt the brush of his tongue against hers. *What was this?*

He did it again. His hand cupped her cheek and eased her into accepting him. Tentatively, she responded. Their kiss took on a new passion and Jocelyn reveled in the discovery of new sensations. She could have stood here kissing like this for hours—but then, he broke it off.

“Jocelyn?” His voice sounded as if he'd been drugged with laudanum.

“Michael?” She didn't sound more coherent herself.

He removed his hand from where it had

been resting on her waist. A rush of cool night air brought her to her senses and she was immediately embarrassed.

She practically jumped out of his arms. “What were you doing?”

Her sharp words sobered him, too. He placed a finger over her lips. “Shhh. Pretend we are lovers.”

“We were just doing a remarkable imitation.” Her cheeks burned at the memory of how completely she’d given herself over to him.

In the moonlight, she could see the planes of his face, but the expression in his silver eyes was lost in shadow.

His arm returned to her waist, his voice a low hum close to her ear. “Your Thomas is here, lurking beyond the garden. You

wanted to make him jealous, didn't you?"

She started to turn to look but his arms pulled her back. "No," he whispered against her hair. "We don't want him to think we know he's there. What better way to make him believe I am a serious suitor than to be caught in the garden together?"

Something was not right. "Why would he be lurking in the garden?"

"I don't know. I've never laid eyes on him."

"Then how do you know it is him?"

Michael pulled back, his mouth flattening into a frown. "Are you always this suspicious?"

"Do you always grab women and kiss them?" she countered.

Before he could answer, there was

movement in the overgrown Hebe bushes at the back of the garden.

Jocelyn went still. Thomas *was* there. She could feel his presence. She stepped closer to Michael.

“So you believe me now,” he crowed quietly.

“Hmmm,” she murmured, all too aware of his body heat and not really in a rush to move away. Funny, she’d never noticed another man except Thomas. However, here in Michael’s arms, she was aware of every nuance, every detail. He smelled spicy warm and very masculine. His hands were large and capable, with long tapered fingers. They were the hands of a man who could handle anything.

She shouldn’t be this observant if she

were in love with Thomas . . . should she? Even though Michael was doing her a favor?

He moved a step closer, the weight of his hand at her waist comfortable and reassuring. The tip of her nose rubbed against the underside of his chin. His beard was already growing in and she couldn't resist nuzzling his skin, intrigued by the prickly smoothness.



This was madness.

Michael had congratulated himself on his quick thinking. He'd spun quite a story out of her need to make her former suitor jealous and he thanked the Lord for the rustling of whatever animal was in the

bushes to give credence to his lies—except now he found himself the victim of his own ruse.

Her kiss had almost undone him. It had been a heady mix of innocence and innate sensuality. Jocelyn was not the kind of woman who would hold back. No, she would give all and right now, with her breasts against his chest and his manhood happily ready for duty, his thoughts were anything but gentlemanly.

Then her nose tickled the underside of his chin. He frowned down at her. Her eyes were shiny in the moonlight. “Do you think he’s left?” she whispered, snuggling closer.

“I don’t know.” His heartbeat pounded in his ears. Could she not *feel* his reaction to her?

“We can’t stand here all night.”

He didn’t want to *stand* here all night. He wanted to lift her skirts—

Dear God, what had he gotten himself into? He’d never been a lothario. He’d always had control over his lusts. After all, he’d taken his promise to Ivy seriously.

So why did he hear himself say, “One more kiss and he’ll be good and jealous?”

Her eyes widened slightly at the suggestion and then she nodded, her lashes fluttering down as she offered her mouth up to him. Michael felt like a scoundrel taking advantage of her trust, and yet he could not resist.

He brushed his lips against hers. She caught her breath. Against his chest, he felt her nipples tighten. He could picture her

breasts in his mind, firm and ripe with dark seductive nipples. He was lost. There was no hesitation as he claimed his next kiss, nor did he hold back. Hot blood raced through his veins and he couldn't have attempted caution if he'd wished. He kissed her soundly and fully and she met him every step of the way.

Her tongue slid along his. Her hands fisted the material of his cheap "peddler" jacket and held on tightly as if she feared being swept away. He slipped his hand down along the indentation of her waist, over the curve of her buttock, pressing her intimately against himself.

A man could lose all sanity with a woman who could kiss like this—

A snore with the resonance of a bear's

rumble broke through the stillness of the night.

Michael barely registered the sound but it had an immediate and dramatic effect on Jocelyn. She started, her hands pushing him away. Dazed, he broke the kiss, keeping a protective arm around her. "What is that?"

"My uncle. He often falls asleep in his laboratory and when he is deeply asleep, he snores so loud the roof shakes. I shall have to wake him and urge him to his bed."

Jocelyn pulled his arms from her waist. "I must go in. It would not be good if he caught us out here."

He nodded, his movements slow After all, there was no blood in his brain at this moment.

She leaned up to his ear, her body

stretching along his, but her words were anything but lover like. “I think Thomas is gone now.”

Her question was a bucket of cold water on his passion. Here he was, his arms around the girl. . . and she was thinking of another man. He wanted to roar with frustration.

What was it about him that the women he courted couldn't seem to give him their undivided attention?

The whole reason he had his entire body wrapped around Jocelyn was to prove himself to Ivy, who was probably off somewhere in London flirting with a viscount. Meanwhile, Jocelyn worried over a bumpkin without the wit to know what he had.

“Oh, I am certain he is long gone,”

Michael answered brusquely, hating even his own lie at this moment.

She nodded and took a step toward the house. "I must go." Impulsively, she reached out and gave his hand a brotherly squeeze. "Thank you. Thank you for all that you are doing. You are a kind man, Michael."

She faded into the shadows and was gone. He heard the door open a crack and shut behind her.

Kind?

He stood alone in the garden moonlight feeling like a bloody fool.

He couldn't believe how caught up in the moment he'd been. He'd enjoyed her kisses, hell, he was *obsessed* with them. He'd wanted to sink down to the ground with her

and make endless, mindless love to her.

And she thought he was merely being *kind*?

Was this how Ivy saw him and why she hadn't been more receptive to him in London? While he thought he was being a gentleman, did she view him as some sort of prig and long for more of the rake? After all, what man wanted to be thought of as *kind*?

Geoffrey Kenyon's resonant snore mocked him.

Michael turned away and walked toward the road. Jocelyn was probably already in bed, dreaming of the man she loved while he'd stood out in the garden ready to howl out of frustration. Especially when he realized he'd been too busy kissing to gain

any information on Kenyon or his formula!

He walked fast to burn off pent-up energy, his mind working furiously.

He had to continue to see Jocelyn. After all, she was his entry to her uncle . . . and he would take her to the ball. He'd promised. But that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the venture—and yes, he had enough pride to want Jocelyn to see him as a potent lover. He was *not* some “kind” man. The characterization left a sour taste in his mouth.

But what if he were too much of a gentleman? What if that was the reason women chose others before him?

The question haunted him long into the night.



From the darkness of her bedroom, which overlooked the garden, Jocelyn peered through the curtains and watched Michael leave. He swatted at a rosebush as if something angered him. She touched her lips. They were still swollen from his bruising kisses and deep within, she felt edgy with need.

What had she done?

The kisses she'd shared with Michael could have set the village afire. They certainly had sparked a flame in her—and she had only met the man today. She'd allowed him to take shocking liberties. If her uncle's snore hadn't reminded her of where she was, who knows what could have happened?

And right there in front of Thomas.

She strained her eyes to see if she could spot Thomas, but she couldn't. Perhaps he had slipped away while she had been busy kissing.

Dropping the curtain back into place, she walked barefoot to her bed and climbed between the sheets, but she didn't go right to sleep. She couldn't. Of course, she should have been sleepless worrying about what Thomas thought of her kissing Michael. Instead, she found herself worrying over her yellow muslin dress.

Before, it had been fine enough to wear to the ball. Now she needed something else. She wanted something new, something special.

Counting on her fingers in the dark, she attempted to estimate how much she could

spend on a dress if she economized the household expenses for the next month.

The sum was not impressive.

She told herself she would think of something. After all, Thomas would really notice her in a new frock. However, as she fell asleep, it wasn't Thomas she was thinking about. . . it was Michael and his kisses.

Dear Lord, that man knew how to kiss!



Thomas came out of his hiding place in one of the overgrown Hebe shrubs and shook off the twigs and the leaves. He had come over this evening to talk to Jocelyn and find out who was escorting her to his betrothal ball. He hoped it was Billy

Fletcher.

And of course, he'd had to be careful. What if someone saw him at the Kenyons' and reported back to Elfreda?

Her uncle had informed him she was dining with the Lettmans. Thomas should have returned home, but he hadn't. Instead, he'd hidden in the garden waiting for her to return. He'd felt a bit foolish—but he had to see her.

Unfortunately, he was rewarded for his patience when she'd returned from the Lettmans' with a stranger. This man was *not* from Wye. Furthermore, Jocelyn had *never* kissed Thomas the way she'd been kissing him. Nor had they ever had assignations in the garden in the middle of the night.

He covered the ground between her

house and his own, his mind troubled. Here he had thought she was brokenhearted . . . and in reality she was involved in a love affair.

The thought brought Thomas to a standstill. Jealousy raged through him.

Yes, she was free to pursue another. After all, he was marrying someone else, *but she hadn't waited very long, had she?* Why, his betrothal hadn't even been announced yet!

He was in a foul mood when he returned home and not ready for his mother's curious questions. Of course, she'd waited up; she always waited up. But he wasn't in the mood to talk.

Chapter Eight



Another Tangle to the Web

Rose Burkhardt loved her son Thomas but knew he needed direction in life. For the past ten years or so, she'd feared he would marry Jocelyn Kenyon. She'd always known he could do much better.

Her conviction had been vindicated when Lady Elfreda had singled out her son. And her choice had made Rose a celebrity in the village.

It was a good match and Lord Vaughn was very generous. Rose was not going to let Jocelyn Kenyon ruin this marriage. Oh, she had no doubt the chit would try if she could. Ever since the orphaned Jocelyn had

arrived in Wye she'd latched on to her Thomas. Public sympathy was on Jocelyn's side and over the years Rose couldn't say anything derogatory without appearing churlish. But that didn't stop her from practically doing a jig in the street when Thomas had solved the problem himself by falling in love with Elfreda.

Or was he really in love?

Rose was too aware that there was still time to cry off and that wherever Thomas had been this late at night, he'd *not* been to Lord Vaughn's.

She could have wagered the milk money her son had been to see Jocelyn and his sullenness did not bode well for his marriage.

After a sleepless night, she came up with

a scheme.

The next morning, at a reasonable hour, she went to see Lady Elfreda on the pretense of offering her good silver platter for use on Friday night.

Lady Elfreda was happy to see her. "Thank you so much for your offer. However, I believe everything is in good order."

"Yes, of course it is," Rose said. "I knew it would be. I don't know what I was thinking. I didn't sleep well last night." With a long-suffering sigh, she admitted, "Thomas was out late. I never sleep whenever anyone in my family is out at night. I was the same way about my dear departed husband, bless his soul. Never could shut an eye."

She knew the mention of Thomas's name would command Lady Elfreda's complete attention. "He was out late? He left here early."

"I'm certain he was with friends," Rose offered.

"Yes, he is very popular." However, a small line of worry appeared between Lady Elfreda's brows.

"He is," Rose agreed, waited two beats and then speculated, "Of course, I do know he saw Jocelyn Kenyon yesterday. I don't mean to meddle, my lady, but you must be on guard at all times. There are women who wouldn't hesitate to poach on another's intended."

The color drained from Lady Elfreda's face at the mention of Jocelyn's name. "He

saw her?”

“Oh, they are old friends. You have nothing to worry about in that quarter,” Rose said, knowing full well Lady Elfreda would do exactly that.

“Yes, you are right,” the younger woman murmured.

Then, having decided the proper interval for a call had been observed, and having accomplished her purpose, Rose said her good-byes.

Thomas would not have another chance to dally after Jocelyn. Oh, no, not at all.

Of course, once the betrothal was announced, all would be safe.

Chapter Nine



Woored in Earnest?

By midmorning, Jocelyn finally reached a decision about her yellow muslin . . . and successfully put the kisses in the garden out of her mind, sort of.

She would take the dress to Mrs. Jeter, the local seamstress, to see if she could freshen it, perhaps fashion a new bodice out of another material or put a flounce hem on the skirt. This way the cost would not be out of the range of Jocelyn's meager funds.

With the relatively new dress and Michael by her side, well, Thomas would have to take notice.

In the calm light of day, she could

dismiss the kisses she and Michael had shared. The moonlight had caused both of them to lose their heads a little. There had been no meaning to those kisses other than to put on a good show for Thomas—although she wasn't going to let Michael kiss her again. There was no sense in pressing her luck!

Downstairs, a foul smell made her nose wrinkle and led her to her uncle's laboratory. "You promised you weren't going to burn the rubber anymore," she complained.

"I had to," he threw over his shoulder with frustration. "I can't figure the stuff out. The only way I can manipulate its properties is with heat."

"Open a window," she ordered, and then

seeing he wasn't paying attention, she went around and did it herself. For a second, looking over the garden, she paused, remembering last night.

Her garden was her delight. It was an eclectic mixture of shrubs, flowers, and herbs. Some of the plants had come all the way from the Orient. The overgrown Hebe bushes formed the back "wall" and a bench in the center was surrounded by roses, lavender, and germander.

She and Michael had been standing beside this window where morning glories climbed the brick. A sudden heat rushed through her and she had to forcefully put the memory of their meeting from her mind. "I'm going to the dressmaker's."

Uncle Geoff nodded, too involved in his

experiment to answer.

Jocelyn put her yellow dress into a basket, tied the wide pink ribbon of her Gypsy straw bonnet beneath her chin, and stepped outside. There was the promise of summer in the air. The day was perfect for an outing with huge, fat clouds drifting across a blue sky. And, as she walked down the steps, she saw Michael waiting for her by the gate.

Her heart kicked up a beat. *Dear Lord, he is handsome.*

He smiled as if reading her thoughts. “How are you this morning?”

“Well. Thank you.”

His smile turned lazy, his gaze dropping to her lips. “I was coming to pay a call.”

Jocelyn struggled to keep her wits. “I’m

sorry I have an errand to run.” She slipped out the gate. “Perhaps later?”

“Where are you going? I’ll walk with you,” he replied.

She didn’t know if that was a wise idea. Her resolve to keep her focus on Thomas was quickly evaporating. “I’m certain you have more important things to do,” she persisted. “Like sell tea.”

“Oh, that.” He frowned, and then brightened as he answered, “I could sell some to you. What is your preference? Indian spice or Earl Grey? Do you like a strong or mild blend?”

“I’m not truly a tea drinker. Perhaps you should ask someone else?”

He dismissed the idea. “I can do that later. Right now, nothing is more important to me

than you.”

Jocelyn stopped dead in her tracks, uncertain. Gone was the easy friendship of last night and in its place was something more heated. Something more interesting.

He took her basket from her. “Here, let me help.” Before she could protest, he started walking toward the center of the village and she had no choice but to follow.

They walked in silence for a moment. Jocelyn found herself in a wondrous panic over the thought he might actually be attracted to her. What did this mean?

And how did she feel about it?

Words failed her. After all, she was in love with Thomas . . . or so she had to remind herself.

On such a fine day, a good number of

people were out and about. A group of girls giggled into their hands over some joke only they knew and neighbors were out sweeping their steps or meeting on the street for a gossip. They eyed Jocelyn and Michael as they walked by and there were more than a few raised eyebrows. The Clark sisters, the village spinsters, couldn't help a soft "Oh my," as they passed and Jocelyn felt a touch of vindication. The sisters had been the first to shake their heads and announce her "on the shelf" when Thomas had jilted her.

"We are causing some comment," Michael observed dryly.

"There are few strangers in Wye."

"And the one stranger there is is walking with you."

Again, he gave her a warm, appreciative smile that set her stomach fluttering. His marked attention, especially in public, made her uncertain. “Your escorting me to the ball is an arrangement between us,” she reminded him in a low undertone. “You don’t need to playact for the village.”

“Who said I’m playacting?”

Jocelyn turned to him, but any retort died on her lips because when she looked at him, all she could think about were his kisses. Yet, some inner voice warned her to be careful. This was all too quick, too convenient. He had a motive she couldn’t quite understand.

Then she remembered that last night he’d confessed he was in love with someone else. She became even more suspicious.

However, before she could question him, the vicar's wife, Mrs. Banks, came out of the butcher's shop, right in front of them. With a hint of surprise, she said, "Hello, Miss Kenyon, how are you?" Her question may have been directed to Jocelyn, but her gaze was on Michael. Her husband the vicar was Uncle' Geoff's closest friend.

Jocelyn grudgingly introduced Michael, and he was quick to charm the woman. Mrs. Banks was obviously impressed. "You sell tea? I drink lots of tea. You must call on me."

"That I shall," he assured her.

"Don't let him forget," she warned Jocelyn.

"I won't."

Mrs. Banks smiled again at Michael.

“One would never imagine you a peddler, such polish. Good day, Miss Kenyon, Mr. Donaldson.” She turned and went on her way but had gone no more than six steps before the Clark sisters and Mrs. Mayes waylaid her, obviously full of questions.

“She’s right,” Jocelyn said thoughtfully, moving away from the chattering women. “You do carry yourself well, much like I imagine a soldier would. Have you been in the military?”

Her observation apparently surprised and, to her mind, pleased him. “What makes you suspect that?”

“The straightness of your back and the precision of your movements. You also have this habit of acting as if you should be the one in charge. You don’t like following

another's lead, do you?"

He laughed. "I do like giving orders. Of course, I was the youngest of five brothers and three sisters. I've had more than my share of being bullied around. If I didn't speak up, I'd be drowned out in the crowd."

That he had such a large family intrigued her. "Where were you raised?"

"Sussex. You can't tell?"

She shook her head. "You have no accent. And I can tell you are well-educated by the way you speak. Mrs. Banks is right. You are not the sort of man I would imagine to be peddling wares over the countryside."

"Peddling is honest work," he countered. "The villages are the backbone of England and I like meeting people."

“Undoubtedly,” she answered. “But why would a soldier be marching through them pretending to be a tea merchant?”

Her question had been a stab in the dark and she was surprised to realize she’d hit a mark.

More amazing was that instead of denying her accusation, his lips curved with admiration. “Well done, Jocelyn.” He leaned toward her, his voice close to her ear. “And my answer is, perhaps he is looking for a dark-haired beauty with a lively intelligence. The sort of woman a man can’t find just anywhere.”

His compliment robbed her of speech. She stared, uncertain whether to believe him.

He accentuated his words by bringing her hand up to his lips. Right there, in front of

Mrs. Jeter's dress shop and all of Wye.

Jocelyn's heart pounded against her chest. His kiss on her fingers had been a mere brush of the lips and yet she felt the heat of it all the way through her York tan gloves.

She pulled her scrambled wits together. "You didn't answer my question, Michael."

"About why I enjoy being a peddler?" he asked, equivocating.

"No, about what it is you want, and why," she answered, her voice barely a whisper. "I may be naïve, sir, but I am not slow-minded. I sense there is more to you than meets the eye."

His silvery gaze met hers. "Isn't it obvious what I want? I want you."

Jocelyn stared at him, a part of her wanting to believe his words, and another

part warning her to be wary.

His lips curved into a lazy smile. "Give ground, Jocelyn," he begged softly. "I want no more than your friendship."

She might have challenged his statement except he changed the subject. Opening the door to Mrs. Jeter's shop, its merry bell announcing their arrival, he said, "Shall we go inside?"

"You would go in with me, too?" she asked, not moving.

"Of course, why not?" he said.

"Well, because there isn't a man in Wye who likes to cool his heels inside Mrs. Jeter's."

He laughed, his straight even teeth flashing in the sun. "I want to be where you are." He held up a hand to ward off her

protests. “Please, Jocelyn, don’t warn me again that I need not be attentive—” Which was exactly what she’d been about to do. “—Or that I should go sell tea. I’m where I want to be.”

And, God help her, she wanted to believe him. Jocelyn had no choice but to enter the shop.

Mrs. Jeter was pleased to see her—and she liked the look of Michael, too. She offered him a glass of cider and a chair by the window while they conducted their business.

The dress shop was a small room with a long counter and several tables stacked high with fabric. One stack was silks, another cambrics, and another muslins, all in various shades and colors. Fitting rooms and

a workshop were in the back, separated by a flowered curtain.

Jocelyn was a bit shy about talking over changes to the dress with Mrs. Jeter in front of Michael, but he appeared lost in his own thoughts as he studied the comings and goings on the street outside.

Mrs. Jeter thought she had a piece of green velvet that would make a lovely bodice and hem to the yellow muslin. Jocelyn didn't know how the two fabrics would look together and she was no longer certain she wanted to cut off the embroidered hem.

"I'll bring it out and we'll have a look." The dressmaker went into her back room.

As Jocelyn turned to say something to Michael, she noticed his gaze was riveted to

something he saw outside the window She looked and caught sight of Lord Vaughn's coat of arms on the side of his coach.

Less than a heartbeat later, the welcoming bell over the door tinkled and Lady Elfreda walked in . . . escorted by Thomas.

Chapter Ten



The Yellow Muslin

From the way Jocelyn tensed, Michael instantly knew this was Thomas and his new love. The three of them froze in a tableau of annoyed recognition and dismayed surprise.

Of course, there had been no mistaking the earl's coach. As the son of an earl, Michael knew what impact the coat of arms on a coach could have on a sleepy village . . . and he sensed Lady Elfreda knew it, too.

He'd come to his feet when she entered the shop and almost had to rub his eyes to see if they were playing tricks. Lady Elfreda was a beauty—and an identical twin to Ivy! On closer inspection, her features

were not as fine as Ivy's but there was a definite likeness. They could have been sisters. She had the same glorious blond hair, vibrant blue eyes and she carried herself with the studied grace of the schoolroom, much like a hundred other debutantes.

He found himself unexpectedly thinking he preferred Jocelyn's more animated style than Elfreda's refined gentility.

But the true object of his curiosity was her beloved Thomas. And he was disappointed . . . naturally.

Yes, the man was darkly handsome in a roughhewn manner. Lucy had said he was a farmer and obviously a successful one. He also had those deep blue eyes the ladies all seemed to like, but to Michael's mind he

wasn't anything special. He saw nothing about Thomas that should command Jocelyn's loyalty.

Thomas met his frank gaze with a scowl so fierce it took both the women by surprise. Lady Elfreda wrapped her arm possessively around his while Jocelyn moved to stand in front of Michael, who couldn't understand what he'd done to earn the younger man's instant animosity.

Jocelyn looked back over her shoulder. "The kiss," she whispered.

But Michael knew Thomas hadn't actually witnessed the kiss, so his obvious jealousy must stem from his still being in love with Jocelyn.

Michael discovered he didn't like that thought.

Poor Mrs. Jeter walked out of her back room, a piece of green velvet in her hand, and came to a halt. “Oh, my,” she murmured, aware of the crosscurrents in the room. She hurried forward and bobbed a curtsy. “Good morning, Lady Elfreda. Your dress is almost ready.”

“Thank you,” Lady Elfreda said, pointedly giving her back to Jocelyn and Michael.

It was not a wise move. Jocelyn bristled at the slight. Michael took a step to her side. “She’s jealous. Be careful.”

His warning served to bring out her stubbornness. “Good morning, my lady,” she said in a bright, cheery voice. “How are you today?” She studiously ignored Thomas’s presence.

Lady Elfreda appeared tempted to cut Jocelyn and yet had enough good manners to not be so unwise. "I am well, Miss Kenyon. And yourself?"

"Very well, thank you. Let me introduce you to Mr. Donaldson. He's a tea merchant who is visiting Wye and is staying with Mr. and Mrs. Lettman. Mr. Donaldson, this is Lady Elfreda and her—"A slight hesitation here. "—Her escort, Mr. Burkhardt. Mr. Donaldson will be escorting my uncle and myself to the ball if that meets with your approval."

Lady Elfreda's reserve instantly thawed. "You wish to bring a guest? Why, by all means, please do." She gifted Michael with a radiant smile. "Welcome to Wye, sir. Have you known Miss Kenyon long?"

“For a very short time, but I must admit I am enjoying my stay and her company.” He placed his hand possessively on Jocelyn’s elbow and enjoyed watching Burkhardt grind his teeth while pretending bravado.

“A tea peddler?” the farmer said with a smirk and then turned away to laugh quietly under his breath.

Lady Elfreda gave him a cross look and Michael couldn’t help but like her. She was no snob and struck him as a good soul, especially when she tactfully changed the subject. “May I try the dress on, Mrs. Jeter?”

The seamstress picked up her cue. “Yes, my lady, this way, please.” She started for the back room.

Turning to Burkhardt, Lady Elfreda said,

“I shall not be long. Perhaps you have an errand or two to run?”

Burkhardt shook his head and to her dismay said, “I’ll wait. Perhaps I can convince Mr. Donaldson to brew a cup of tea for me.”

Michael wasn’t about to comment on such a juvenile swipe, knowing both women were smart enough to look down on Burkhardt for being a fool. Instead, he said pleasantly, “I’ll be happy to set an appointment to show you my teas.”

“Don’t bother,” Burkhardt countered.

“Thomas,” Lady Elfreda started even as Jocelyn stepped between the two men.

“I’ll behave,” Thomas promised Lady Elfreda, who had no choice but to go in and try on her dress.

Jocelyn moved Michael back over to the corner where he had been sitting. “It’s working,” she said with an excited whisper. “I’ve never seen him so jealous. Your kisses did the trick.”

“Yes, yes,” Michael murmured, frustrated to be a victim again of those blasted kisses. Perhaps *both* women weren’t wise enough to see Burkhardt for the buffoon he was. He turned away.

If Jocelyn noticed he was irritated, it didn’t seem to bother her. Instead, she fetched the piece of velvet the dressmaker had placed on the counter and held it up to her yellow gown. She stood not more than four feet from Burkhardt.

Michael frowned, an action the farmer caught. The air between them tensed,

especially when, with a smile, Burkhardt sidled along the counter toward Jocelyn.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “You aren’t going to change your yellow dress? It’s my favorite on you.”

“Well, all things must change,” Jocelyn replied blithely and Michael wanted to shout “Good for you!”

But then Burkhardt took the dress away from her. He deliberately gave Michael his back and leaned forward to talk to Jocelyn in confidence.

Michael had enough.

He didn’t like Burkhardt and, to his mind, he’d lost his chance with Jocelyn. He should leave her alone.

In two strides, he cut between them, took Jocelyn’s arm and led her back toward the

window. “Come, I want to show you something,” he said loudly. However, once he had her safe, he murmured, “He’s a boor.”

“He’s jealous,” she answered and couldn’t have sounded happier. “Your plan last night worked. And I think Lady Elfreda admires you.”

“What?” He was so shocked he hadn’t bothered to keep his voice down.

“Is something the matter, Jocelyn?” Burkhardt asked.

“No, everything is fine,” she said blissfully.

Michael pulled her closer and his actions had nothing to do with his playing a role. “No, everything is *not* fine. You can hatch schemes for yourself but don’t go

matchmaking for me.”

“Oh, I forgot. You already have someone you care for.” Was it his imagination or was her comment a bit pointed?

“Yes, I do,” he stated flatly and then realized Burkhardt was attempting to eavesdrop. He frowned, bringing Jocelyn closer into the corner with him. “You are the one scheming,” he told her. “I’m merely an innocent party.”

“I know.” She glanced before adding unrepentantly, “I still believe you and Elfreda would make a handsome couple.”

“Jocelyn.”

“She’s wealthy.”

“I have my own money.”

“Not like she has,” she said with certainty.

He grunted an answer, definitely out of sorts. Here he'd been doing everything to charm her and she was trying to toss him to Lady Elfreda.

All this was his own fault. He shouldn't have gotten personally involved with Jocelyn's plight. But then, he understood the lovelorn, or thought he did. He just didn't think this Burkhardt was worthy of her, and perversely, even though it was none of his business, he told her as much, right there in the dress shop with the rascal glowering at his back.

"You don't know him," she answered.

"Have you ever kissed him the way you kissed me last night?"

Her brows came together in indignation. "I've kissed him before."

He raised a suspicious eyebrow “Like you kissed me last night?”

“Of course.”

“You’re lying.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I’ve had more experience kissing than you have and kisses like those we shared don’t come along very often. Jocelyn, take my advice and forget about Burkhardt. He’d bore you to death in a fortnight.” The moment he spoke the words, he knew they were true.

But she wasn’t going to believe him, not the stubborn and proud Jocelyn. She gave him a cold look. “I’ve known Thomas all my life. He’s the only man I could ever love.”

“Except I’m the better kisser,” Michael

goaded.

Jocelyn rolled her eyes. “I kissed you to make him jealous. I knew he was watching.”

“You’re lying,” he answered with a calmness he was far from feeling.

“No, I’m not.” She punctuated this statement with a complacent little smile.

This woman could drive a man to madness. She couldn’t have kissed him the way she had last night and not have had *some* attraction for him. Or could she?

He used their close proximity to demonstrate to her she wasn’t impervious to him. “I’d like to kiss you again,” he said quietly “Right here. I’d like to lean you back over those bolts of fabrics and kiss you senseless.”

Now, he had her attention. He continued,

lowering his head so his lips brushed her ear. “And then, I would make love to you, right there on top of those silks. And when I was done, there would be no thought of any man but me in your brain.”

Her mouth dropped open. She was shocked by his boldness and yet, her nipples had hardened into tight buds that pressed against the material of her bodice.

Michael smiled. “You are not unaffected by me, no matter what your lying lips may say.”

“Jocelyn, is something wrong?” Burkhardt’s voice cut into the moment.

She pulled away and Michael let her go. He’d proven his point.

“No, nothing,” she said, looking daggers at Michael.

Burkhardt moved forward as if coming to her rescue but Jocelyn ignored him by turning her back and pretending to be interested in the fabrics. When she realized she was examining a silk, her cheeks reddened and Michael knew she had visions of them making love.

Her gaze met his and for a second, the heat her look inspired threatened to set him on fire.

What was he doing? Why couldn't he have left well enough alone? His job was to retrieve a formula, not sort out Jocelyn's love life or become attracted to her himself. Years of careful planning and sacrifice were in danger of being thrown away.

Especially when she returned her attention to the silks, rubbing the fabric

between her fingers. Without looking at him, she whispered, “This woman you love must be very lucky.”

And he almost confessed all.

Fortunately, Lady Elfreda came out of the back room with Mrs. Jeter preventing his response. “My dress is going to be beautiful,” she announced, but her smile turned uncertain as she sensed the tension in the air. She looked to Burkhardt, who glared at Michael, who in turn was focused on Jocelyn. The sparkle in Lady Elfreda’s eyes died and Michael laid her unhappiness at Burkhardt’s door.

The foolish farmer wanted both of them. The idea made Michael unreasonably angry.

“I believe it is time to leave,” Lady Elfreda informed Burkhardt. Her words

seemed to remind him of his responsibilities.

“Yes, of course.”

“The dress is nice,” she told him.

“I’m certain,” Burkhardt replied, his attention straying back to Jocelyn.

The corners of Lady Elfreda’s mouth tightened. She gave last-minute instructions to the dressmaker, turned on her heel, and left the shop. Burkhardt had to hurry to catch up with her. Michael looked out the window and watched the two of them go down the street toward the church on another errand.

“I don’t like him,” he announced.

Mrs. Jeter didn’t know what to say and Jocelyn pointedly ignored him. Instead, she walked to the counter and continued the discussion about the green velvet bodice

that Lady Elfreda's arrival had interrupted.

Michael sat back down in the chair, feeling very much like a schoolboy who had been dismissed by his elders.

What the devil was happening to him? He loved Ivy . . . and yet there was something about Jocelyn that caught his imagination, that provoked him and made him want her to see how much better she was than Burkhardt.

He watched the women compare the velvet against the muslin. He didn't understand why Jocelyn was refashioning the dress save for the possibility that Kenyon was not a wealthy man. Of course, that would be his motive for stealing Sir William's formula.

The two women left him to step into the

back room. Michael hoped Jocelyn wasn't going to be much longer.

The bell rang over the shop door. Burkhardt entered and walked directly up to Michael.

"Don't think I'm fooled by you," the young farmer said in a low, heated voice. "You harm Jocelyn and I shall see you tarred, feathered, and maybe worse."

Michael rose. "How can I harm her any more than you already have? I'm not the one who jilted her."

Burkhardt's eyeballs practically popped out of his head, he was so angry. However, before he could say something else, the dressmaker pulled back the curtain. "Did someone come in? Oh, Mr. Burkhardt. Was there something else Lady Elfreda

needed?" Jocelyn stood behind her.

Burkhardt recovered his temper quickly. "She thought she left her gloves in here."

"Why, no," the dressmaker said. "She had her gloves on when she left. I distinctly remember her putting them on."

"She must not have noticed," Burkhardt replied stiffly, caught in his lie. He abruptly left the shop without so much as a "good-bye."

A small frown appeared between Jocelyn's eyes. However, she finished her conversation with the dressmaker. "I'll let you know what I decide."

"You'd best hurry, dear," Mrs. Jeter said. "The ball is in two days. I can't work miracles."

"Yes, I know. Thank you." Jocelyn

placed the yellow muslin back into her basket. She looked to Michael. "Are you ready to leave?"

He nodded and opened the door for her. Lady Elfreda's coach was gone.

They walked in silence for a bit, heading back in the direction of her uncle's house.

"You didn't do anything about the dress," he observed, prodding her into conversation. He found he did not like a quiet Jocelyn.

"It's fine as it is."

No, it wasn't. He had sisters. He knew enough about balls and women to know she would rather have had a new dress.

"I think our scheme is working," she said. "Thomas came back to the dress shop to see what we were up to, didn't he?"

This was not the subject Michael wanted

to discuss; however, he had no choice. “He warned me away from you.”

She stopped. “He did?”

“Pleased?” He couldn’t help the cynicism in his voice or stop himself from adding again, “I think you can do better.”

“So you’ve told me,” she answered briskly. “However, I love him.”

“Do you love him, or are you afraid of change?” He wanted to needle her into seeing her precious Thomas in a new light, except for the first time, his words struck a chord within him. Was he not guilty of the same with Ivy?

Jocelyn refused to answer. Head high, she resumed walking. He wished he knew what she was thinking—once she got her back up, she could be tricky. He changed

subjects to draw her out.

“Why don’t you ask your uncle for a new dress?”

“I like my yellow dress,” she insisted.

“Why? Because you’ve worn it to every dance in memory?”

She stopped and faced him, a flash of fire in her brown eyes. At last, he felt she was truly looking at him. “And what if I have? Oh, pardon me, you are flush in the pocket, Mr. Tea Merchant; money means nothing to you.”

“Selling tea isn’t a bad living.” It was the only thing he could think to say and he sounded stupid.

She shook her head and started walking.

But Michael realized he’d created an opening to ask about his real reason for

being in Wye. He came up beside her. “What does your uncle do?”

“He’s an inventor. A chemist, actually. But he’s also a bit of a tinker and a mechanic. He’s very good. I mean, scientists from all over England correspond with him.”

“What inventions has he created? Anything I would know about?”

She considered for a moment. “He helped one gentleman with what he called the ‘trajectory’ of a bridge and another he helped to make explosives not flare so quickly in a rocket.”

“Rockets? Like what Congreve invented?”

“Absolutely. In fact, Uncle Geoff worked with Congreve. They are great

friends.”

Michael had seen some of Congreve’s rockets fired during battle and they’d been so inaccurate at reaching their target, he had not been impressed. “What is your uncle working on now?”

Jocelyn shifted the basket from her left arm to her right. “Something dull but what could be very practical. He’s been playing with rubber.”

His voice carefully neutral, he asked, “Like India rubber, the stuff they make balls out of?”

“Yes, but he believes there are many good uses beyond an expensive child’s toy if we can imagine a way to mold the material properly.”

Here was the heart of what Michael had

come in search of. “Uses like what?”

“Well,” she said, forgetting her snit and dropping her voice to a confiding level, “he has a formula he believes will allow us to paint the rubber onto cloth so that the material can’t be penetrated by water.”

“There would be a hundred uses for something like that.”

“Absolutely, and if he is successful, the manufacture of such a cloth could be worth a fortune.”

“Did he create the formula or is this something he is working on with others?” Michael dared to ask.

Jocelyn shook her head. “Mr. Redding sent it to him. Mr. Redding is another chemist who lives in Dover. He’s working with someone else, although I don’t know that

gentleman's name. Mr. Redding is hoping Uncle Geoff will be successful where they had failed."

Her story was completely different from Sir William's and made him wary. Someone was not being honest and he didn't like the notion it might be Sir William.

"You uncle must not like sharing his discoveries," Michael said.

Jocelyn laughed. "Oh no. He says nothing in the sciences could be achieved by a single mind. They all build one discovery on top of the other. Well, here I am."

Michael was surprised to realize they'd reached the gate of her house. He wasn't ready to let her go yet. He enjoyed her company.

As if reading his mind, she said, "I must

go in. I have some letters to prepare for my uncle. I handle most of his correspondence.”

So she *would* know if he and Mr. Redding had exchanged letters. “Tell me, have you ever heard of a Sir William Lewin?”

She considered for a moment. “I believe I have. He is an inventor of sorts. His name is on the rolls of the Royal Society. I’m certain Uncle Geoff knows him. Is he a friend of yours?”

“An acquaintance,” Michael answered, speaking the truth. After all, how well *did* he know Sir William? He certainly didn’t trust him and now suspected the motive for his being sent to Wye.

Of course, Michael’s goal had been to win Ivy . . . although he hadn’t thought

about her very much today.

“You suddenly appear sad,” Jocelyn said. She lightly touched his hand. “Why don’t you come to dinner this evening and meet my uncle? He can be truly fascinating when he talks about his experiments.”

There it was, an open invitation to accomplish what he’d been sent to do. “I’d like that,” Michael said, and he wanted the opportunity to judge Kenyon himself. “What time?”

“Half past six? My uncle likes to eat early.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ll be there.” He held open the gate for her, although he was reluctant to let her go. As she passed him, he caught her fresh scent—air, flowers, and woman. It was more potent than any

perfume.

“I’ll see you this evening,” she said. She started toward the house but then paused. “And, Michael?”

He looked up from closing the gate. “Yes?”

“You do kiss amazingly well.” She colored prettily and hurried on her way.

Michael watched her until she went in the door. Thoughtfully, he turned and started walking away.

Something was not right. Either Sir William was not being completely honest with him; or Geoffrey Kenyon was a scoundrel with a very attractive niece.

Putting his doubts aside, he headed back toward the village. There was one thing he did want to do, something that would

assuage his conscience a bit.

He returned to the dressmaker's shop. Mrs. Jeter came out of her back room to greet him.

"I wish to buy a dress," he said.

"For whom?"

"Miss Kenyon."

The dressmaker's brows shot up.

He relied on charm to put her at ease. Leaning close to the dressmaker, he said, "I know it isn't proper, but I believe she needs one to wear to this ball, don't you?"

"After the way Mr. Burkhardt treated her? Absolutely," Mrs. Jeter said.

"I'm treading carefully here," he admitted. "However, I sense her uncle doesn't have the money for many extras."

Mrs. Jeter laughed. "Mr. Kenyon doesn't

have a practical head for anything. His niece keeps him going. He always claims someday he shall make a fortune. To my thinking, the only way that man will be wealthy is if he can invent a way to turn lead into gold.”

Or rubber into waterproof material.

“I want this dress to be *our* secret, Mrs. Jeter. Can you keep a secret?” He helped her to decide by pulling out his coin purse.

“Oh, yes, I can, sir,” she answered.

“Good. Then, help me to design a dress that will make Miss Kenyon shine.”

And she did exactly that. Mrs. Jeter really was talented and she knew what material would become Jocelyn best. Of course, he had to pay extra to ensure the dress would be ready for Friday.

“You will deliver it?”

“Personally,” she answered.

“And not a word to anyone, not even Miss Kenyon?”

“Absolutely sir.”

He paid her handsomely and left. He didn't know if he was doing right or wrong. Jocelyn thought she wanted her farmer. Michael was certain Burkhardt would bore her in a month and he feared stealing the formula might ruin her uncle.

But whatever happened, she would look her best.



Mrs. Jeter watched the handsome Mr. Donaldson leave her establishment and almost danced with joy. He'd paid her in

coin, right up front.

And if Mr. Donaldson was a tea merchant then she was a crown princess. She knew people and he was no peddler. Why, he hadn't even asked her to purchase tea, not once! He should if he wanted to make a living. But then, with a purse that full, he needn't worry about funds.

She wondered what game was being played but was also glad Miss Kenyon finally had a champion. She said as much to the spinster Clark sisters when they came in to choose a new set of feathers for the turbans they planned to wear to the ball.

"He is handsome, isn't he?" the oldest Miss Clark agreed. "No one more handsome in Wye. Pity about Miss Kenyon being jilted by Mr. Burkhardt. Bad form that

was.”

Mrs. Jeter knew she'd been sworn to secrecy . . . but some secrets were hard to keep.

The dress was one of them.

After all, everyone liked Miss Kenyon, so she had to share the news with the Clark sisters . . . who later told Mrs. Mayes the story . . . who couldn't wait to mention the dress to Mrs. Banks. Mrs. Mayes reasoned the vicar's wife had a responsibility to know *everything* going on in Wye.

And so the story traveled and by midafternoon, everyone knew Mr. Donaldson had purchased a dress for Miss Kenyon.

Some villagers were appalled by the impropriety. Others were titillated. And

some were glad the kind Miss Kenyon had found someone new.

But the person most interested in this news was Rose Burkhardt.

She hurried out to the barn where her son was supervising a crew rebuilding hayricks. “You aren’t going to believe what I’ve just heard,” she started, and told him about the dress.

He didn’t believe her . . . at first.

However, later, when he had time to think, he began to wonder. He thought of Jocelyn in the dress shop with Donaldson, of their closeness and the argument they’d had in the comer of the shop—and his jealousy knew no bounds.

Chapter Eleven



An Unsuitable Gift

Jocelyn stopped by her uncle's study to let him know she'd returned from shopping and to tell him about Michael. She'd not said anything about the tea merchant and perhaps she should.

Uncle Geoff was dozing on his favorite piece of furniture, a Turkish retiring chair upholstered in well-worn Moroccan leather. It sat in the far corner of the room and he catnapped often when he was working. He claimed sleep helped him to find solutions to difficult problems.

For a second, she watched him snoozing peacefully and thought how lucky she was.

He was a dear, caring man with a brilliant mind but a complete lack of practical sense. The two of them had managed quite well together over the years. He'd made her feel safe and protected. Thomas had not been happy when she'd expected him to wait for her while she nursed her uncle to health during his sickness—and yet she would not have done it any other way.

She wondered if Michael's reaction would have been different. There were also other differences between the two men. Michael was taller, more handsome, and had conversation on something other than himself, hunting, or farming. She also sensed that he was honorable, a true gentleman. Of course, he was promised to another, but would he be paying her such marked

attention if his obligation was unbreakable?
Unlike Thomas?

For the first time, she thought of Thomas's defection without heartache . . . and felt the stirrings of anger. She would have waited for Thomas. She'd even been willing to put up with his dragon of a mother!

As if aware of her presence, Uncle Geoff woke. Sitting up, he ran his fingers through his already tousled hair. "I closed my eyes for a minute."

"Hmmmhmmm," she agreed with him, knowing better, and sat down on the edge of the chair. "Is the formula working out the way you wish it to?"

"No. Something is not right. Drat it all. I feel I am on the verge of discovering the secret, but it eludes me."

“You’ll work it out. You always do.” She soothed his hair into a semblance of order and then added thoughtfully, “I’ve invited a guest for dinner.”

Her uncle winced. “I wanted to work. Must I be there?”

“Yes.” She hesitated and then added, “I invited a gentleman. Mr. Donaldson. He is going to escort us to Lord Vaughn’s ball Wednesday night.”

“A ball? Josie, did I say I would attend a ball?”

“Yes, you did. It is Lady Elfreda’s betrothal ball to Thomas and I need your support.”

He leaned back down, remembering. “But what of this Donaldson? If he is going, why must I?”

“You are going as a chaperon,” she replied firmly “And you can spare one night. Everyone in the parish will be there. You must be there, too.”

“But my work—”

“Will wait.” She’d had this argument with him before and she always won. She rose and leaned over to kiss him lightly on the forehead. “I’ll be interested in your opinion of Mr. Donaldson.”

“My opinion? You’ve never asked such a thing before.” His brows came together. “If you’d asked my opinion of young Burkhardt, I would have given you an earful.”

“Did you really not like Thomas?” she asked, surprised.

Uncle Geoff sat up and put his feet on the

floor. “He was fine enough, I suppose, if you like a lad whose mother leads him around by the nose. And as I remember, she never liked you very much.”

“Well, we can hope she likes Lady Elfreda better.” Jocelyn started straightening the stacks of scribbled notes and papers on her uncle’s desk.

“I imagine she does.” He watched her for a moment and then said, “You aren’t very sad, are you, Josie?”

A week ago, she’d been heartbroken. Now, the future didn’t look bleak. “I’m recovering,” she answered.

“So who is this Donaldson?”

Jocelyn wiped some dust off the edge of her uncle’s desk, carefully avoiding the jumble of books stacked one on top of the

other with their spines open to particular pages. "He's a tea merchant."

"A what?"

"He sells teas to different establishments, but you can ask him the particulars over dinner. Remember, at a quarter past six, I expect you to wash up and change your neckcloth. The one you are wearing has spots of something on it. And perhaps you might want to change your shirt as well?" she suggested tactfully.

Uncle Geoff frowned. "Damn me, Josie, but you are finally ready to stop sulking over Burkhardt, aren't you?"

"Yes, uncle, I believe I am." She left the room.



The moment Jocelyn disappeared, Geoffrey returned to his experiments. He knew some people thought he tinkered in vain . . . but to him, he was unlocking secrets of the universe. Of course, for once, this endeavor promised to be lucrative. He'd been fortunate Redding had brought him in on it. Now if only he could devise a way for rubber to not melt in the summer and grow brittle in the winter while being able to apply a coat thin enough on fabric to make it flexible.

He quickly lost himself in the problem and was not pleased when a knock sounded at the window of his study. Geoff looked up and was surprised to see Vicar Banks standing outside in the garden.

He crossed over to the window The vicar

said through the glass, "I must talk to you."

"Go around to the front and come in," Geoff replied reasonably.

"I can't. I don't want Jocelyn to know I'm here."

Now he had Geoff's attention. He opened the window and leaned out. Vicar Banks stood in the soft garden soil. Josie would not be happy to see his boot print in her peony bed. The vicar was a tall, narrow man and Geoff's closest friend in Wye.

"Why are you behaving so secretively?" Geoff asked.

"Because I believe you should know about the rumors my wife overheard."

"Rumors about me?"

"No, about your niece. Geoffrey, there is a tea merchant in the village who has been

paying her marked attentions.”

“I know. I’m to meet him this evening.”

The vicar frowned. “Be wary. You know what they say about peddlers and you will not like this rumor one wit.”

Geoff leaned farther out the window. Jocelyn was probably in the kitchen, which was located not too far from his study. The smell of bread and a ham baking filled the air. In a hushed voice, Geoff asked, “What is the rumor?”

Vicar Banks looked left, then right, to make sure they were not overheard before saying, “He is buying her a dress to wear to Lord Vaughn’s ball.”

“Buying her a dress? That doesn’t sound so bad. Josie hasn’t had a new frock in ages. She’ll be happy to hear the news.” He

would have turned away to go tell her when the vicar grabbed his arm at the wrist and pulled him back out the window.

“No, Geoff. This is terrible news. Every tongue in the village is wagging. The Clark sisters started the talk and they are vipers. They are wondering what your niece has done to earn such a favor from a gentleman she is not related to.”

“Why she’s done nothing. She only just met the man.” Punching the air with one finger to accentuate the words, he said, “She is a good, modest girl—”

“Who is spending time with a peddler. I’m warning you, Geoff, if she were one of my daughters, I’d not let the man close to her.”

Geoff ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t think Josie would do something

disreputable.” He hesitated and added, “He’s escorting us to the ball. He’s to come to dinner tonight to make my acquaintance.”

The vicar motioned Geoff to come closer. “They say there was a bit of a scene today in Mrs. Jeter’s shop between the tea merchant and Burkhardt. Young Thomas isn’t happy. Not one bit.”

“He has forfeited his right to say anything,” Geoff countered.

“My wife and the other ladies in the parish believe he may still have feelings for your niece.”

“Well, he can’t have her. I’d rather she take up with this peddler than that fickle warthog.”

The vicar spoke earnestly, “Geoff, be careful. I’ve warned you before, you give

Jocelyn too much freedom. With this peddler you are going to have to keep a sharp eye out, and you need to do something to stop the rumors about the dress.”

“What do I do?” Geoff asked. He was not good at dealing with people at all. Whenever there was a crisis, Jocelyn handled the matter.

Vicar Banks leaned into the window and took Geoff’s arm by the wrist. “Courage, man! This is no time for a faint heart. What I would do if some stranger started sniffing around my daughters is take the man aside —” He held up Geoff’s wrist, his grip tightening. “—And warn him that if he did *anything* to hurt my child, he’d wish he was in hell after I finished with him.” He gave

Geoff's a fierce twist for emphasis.

Geoff stifled his cry of pain lest Josie hear. "In hell," he repeated dutifully, not quite liking the sound of it. He pulled his arm back, rubbing his wrist. "Should I say something to Josie? I mean, she shouldn't wear the dress, should she?"

"Not unless she wants the whole village talking."

"And what if she likes this man? What if he's turned her head with compliments and promises?"

The vicar frowned. "That is a difficult question. Trust God, my friend."

Geoff hated it whenever his friend started referring important questions to God. Geoff had been waiting for years and God hadn't yet given him one straightforward answer

and there had been times he'd really needed guidance while raising Josie. Perhaps that was why he preferred science. Answers could be found.

"I must go. Be careful," Vicar Banks said and tiptoed off, pausing to check around the corner of the house before he disappeared around it.

Geoff wished he could climb out the window and follow him. Instead, he bumped his head when Jocelyn said from the doorway, "Uncle, you need to go upstairs to dress for dinner."

Rubbing the spot where he had connected with the window frame, Geoff murmured, "I'm going up now."

"It's almost time for him to be here," she said as he passed.

Him. The bounder. “Right, right,” Geoff replied and wished he could barricade himself in his laboratory—but he had to be there for Josie. He’d failed her with Burkhardt and the farmer had broken her heart.

He’d not let the peddler have a chance to hurt her, too.

Chapter Twelve



An Interesting Evening

Michael found he was anxious to have dinner at Kenyon's that evening.

Yes, he'd have an opportunity to learn more about the formula, but he'd also be seeing Jocelyn again. There was something between them. An attraction he didn't want to name and shouldn't be feeling.

He loved Ivy . . . or so he had to remind himself. He rationalized his infatuation with Jocelyn was because he empathized with her. In truth, it was because she was a vibrant, passionate woman. He enjoyed her company and no matter how hard he tried, he could not put their kisses in the garden

out of his mind.

He could have had her. He knew it and she had been fortunate he was a gentleman. Another man might have taken advantage of her trust.

However, when he arrived at her house and she opened the door to greet him, lust hit him full force, in a way he'd never experienced before.

Jocelyn was wearing a peach muslin gown. The color blended with the glow of her skin and Michael could all too well imagine her naked.

The dress's high waist emphasized the full swell of her breasts. He knew her waist was tiny and sensed her legs would be well-proportioned and long. Her wild tangle of curls was again caught up in ribbon. This

one was emerald green and its color brought out the red highlights in her dark hair and the warmth of welcome in her brown eyes.

For the space of several heartbeats, they did not speak but stared, happy to see each other again.

She broke the silence. "My uncle is anxious to meet you."

"And I him." He wanted to touch her, to make love to her. Instead, he removed his hat.

"Please come inside," she offered.

He entered. The smells of roasted meat and fresh baked bread greeted him. He was surprised to see the rooms were small and sparsely furnished. There were no servants, no expensive rugs on the floor or paintings

on the walls.

There were, however, flowers. Jocelyn's flowers raised by her own hand in her garden. Their color and their fragrance turned the house into a home.

"The sitting room is right here," she said, directing him to a cozy room off the main hall. "My uncle will join us shortly."

A loud voice interrupted her. "Josie, has our guest arrived?" Geoffrey Kenyon stomped down the staircase that ended by the front door. He was dressed for dinner although his neckcloth was slightly askew and his hair ruffled.

"Yes, Uncle. This is Mr. Donaldson—"

"I know who he is," Kenyon said belligerently. He walked right up to Michael and attempted to stare him in the

eye . . . which was difficult because Michael was a head and a half taller than he was. “Josie, I think you’d best see to our supper.”

“But Uncle—”

“Mr. Donaldson and I need to talk, man to man. Into the sitting room, sir!” He didn’t wait for a response but marched that way himself, expecting Michael to follow.

Jocelyn’s surprised gaze met Michael’s. She shrugged, conveying her puzzlement. Michael’s guard went up. Could it be Kenyon knew of his purpose for being in Wye? Was it possible he suspected?

“All will be fine,” Michael murmured to her. He had no desire to be unmasked in front of her. “Man talk,” he said lightly.

She forced a smile. “Dinner will be served shortly.”

Uncle Geoff returned to the door of the sitting room. "We'll be done shortly," he said. "Now, off with you," he told her and waited until she'd gone down the hall. "Mr. Donaldson, this way." He motioned Michael into the sitting room.

Inside, Kenyon didn't waste time but announced, "You, sir, are a scoundrel."

So, he knew. And Michael welcomed the opportunity for plain speaking. "I could say the same of you, sir," he countered.

Kenyon looked taken aback. "Me? We're talking about you!"

"Oh, no. *You* are the one guilty of dishonorable conduct," Michael replied. "Sir William told me all of it."

"Sir William?" Kenyon scratched his head. "Sir William who? What are you

talking about? What does this Sir William have to do with the dress you purchased for my niece this afternoon?”

“The dress—?” Michael took a step back, adjusting his thinking. “You know about the dress?”

“Yes, I do, and I wish to know what your intentions were in purchasing it.” As if going by rote, Kenyon continued, punctuating the air with his finger. “Jocelyn is a good, decent young woman and we don’t want her corrupted by the likes of a traveling peddler. Or this Sir William! Who the devil is he, anyway?”

“Sir William Lewin,” Michael said. “Um, a friend who said he knew you.”

“Knew me?” Kenyon appeared to search his memory. “I do not recollect the name.

What does he have to do with the dress?"

"Nothing," Michael said honestly. "I thought there was a connection between you and he." The deeper he was going into this affair, the more odd it became. Could Sir William have been wrong or was there something more sinister going on?

The thought that he might be being played for a fool did not sit well with Michael. "He is a fellow scientist," he prodded.

"Never heard of him. However, I did hear about you buying my niece a dress. You know such a gift is inappropriate."

Michael didn't deny it. "I asked the dressmaker to keep quiet."

Kenyon gave a bark in laughter. "There are no secrets in Wye. I'd wager the gossips knew who you were the moment you took

your first step into the parish. And this dress is a problem. There are many, myself included, who are wondering what your intentions are, Mr. Donaldson, and want you to know Josie is no easy prey.”

Here the truth would suffice. “I meant no disrespect. I knew the ball was important to her and, having sisters of my own, I understand how women feel about clothing. I wanted her to have a nice dress to wear, one that would make her feel special.”

“And that is the only reason? There is no —” Kenyon eyed him sharply. “No *ulterior* motive?”

Well, there had been the kisses, but Michael wasn’t going to bring it up. Instead, he said easily, “None. I met Thomas Burkhardt today, didn’t like him, and

decided I wanted to help Jocelyn shine.”

“Jocelyn, is it?” Kenyon queried. He walked around Michael, looking him up and down with a shrewd eye. “In Wye, when a gentleman buys a young woman an expensive present, it’s the same as making a marriage offer.”

Michael raised his hands to ward off the suggestion. “Oh, no. I can’t, I mean, I would, but I couldn’t. And Jocelyn knows my intentions.” He lowered his hands, concerned. “I wasn’t thinking. I wanted Jocelyn to be happy and I thought she would like the gift.”

“Tea peddling brings in a pretty penny, yes?” Kenyon asked.

“Enough,” Michael said carefully.

“And you are *not* courting my niece?”

Kenyon's belligerence was gone and in its place was a tone of regret.

Michael shook his head. He sat on the back of the settee, one foot swinging back and forth as he realized his mistake. His decision to buy her a dress had compromised her. "I wasn't thinking. I've made everything worse, haven't I? Everyone knows about the dress and is expecting a declaration."

"Or a dishonorable offer." Her uncle sighed. "Well, I'm glad it isn't the latter. I was afraid I'd have to take you to task and you're much younger and stronger than I, lad."

"I'm sorry." And Michael was. "People will think she has been jilted twice."

Kenyon leaned against the settee beside

Michael. "I don't want her to be hurt again."

"Nor do I."

"There must be a way out."

The two men thought hard, each in his own way. After a few moments, her uncle said, "This is all my fault. I could have been a tutor and made a good living. Instead, I seem to fail at everything I do."

"Jocelyn says you are a good inventor."

Modesty stained Kenyon's cheeks. "I have my areas of expertise but I've not yet made a name for myself. Poor Jocelyn, she's wasted her life taking care of me and you're right, Mr. Donaldson, she did deserve a new dress. Especially to wear to that ball in particular." There was a beat of silence and then he asked, "Is it a pretty dress?"

“Yes, it will be,” Michael had to admit. “Mrs. Jeter suggested a white muslin with a rose over sheath. She said it would look quite lovely with Jocelyn’s coloring.”

Kenyon eyed him suspiciously. “You are quite taken with her, aren’t you?”

Yes, he was.

The forthrightness of his thought startled Michael. “I admire her,” he answered, more to convince himself than Kenyon, “but my attentions are already fixed on another.”

“Oh. Pity,” her uncle said.

Yes, Michael had to agree. It was a pity. Jocelyn was someone special and unique. Lately, he was having to force himself to remember Ivy—and if she ever heard he was buying another woman a dress—!

Michael had an idea. “We could tell

everyone you purchased the dress.”

“Me?”

“Why not?” The more Michael thought about it, the better the idea sounded. “We’ll say I was your agent because you were . . .” He trailed off, needing a reasonable excuse.

Kenyon had one. “Busy! Here with my experiments.” He straightened. “Everyone knows I do not shop. And you shall be a friend of the family. Yes, since we are weaving a story, we can add whatever details we wish.” He smiled, liking the scheme. “And everything will be acceptable. Jocelyn shall have her dress although I must pay for it.” He frowned as if this were a problem.

“I’ve already paid the seamstress.”

“But I can’t let you. I mean, I will pay

you back but I'm a bit short of funds. Of course, if this rubber works out, I should come into a substantial amount of cash and when I do, I will repay the debt."

"As you wish," Michael agreed. Kenyon's statement supported Sir William's claim that the formula could be worth a fortune. However, after getting to know Kenyon and his niece, Michael was more and more certain Sir William might not have been completely honest with him. He did not like being played for a fool.

"Let us go see Jocelyn," her uncle said. "She hates to have dinner waiting. When shall I tell her about the dress?"

"Whenever you wish."

He clapped his hands in anticipation. "She'll be pleased and surprised. Oh, yes,

very surprised.”

“Then I am happy to be of service, sir,” Michael said.

“I like you,” Kenyon responded ingenuously. “You may be a peddler, but you are a good man. And you’re spoken for, you say? Another woman has your affections?”

“Yes,” Michael replied firmly. He had his obligation to Ivy although with each passing day in Wye, it seemed more distant.

“Pity,” Kenyon repeated. “Well, come, let us go to the dining room.”



Hunched in a cubby in the wall, Jocelyn heard everything that had been said in the sitting room of the drafty old house. She

quickly escaped into the dining room before the men left the sitting room. She was deeply touched not only by her uncle's concern, but also by Mr. Donaldson's.

He'd bought a dress for her. The generosity of the gift astounded her. However, his empathy for her feelings was what truly touched her.

By the time the men entered the dining room she was putting glasses of cider on the table. They had no idea she had been eavesdropping.

Her gaze met Michael's. He gave away nothing of what had transpired in the living room and she knew he wouldn't. He was the kind of man who valued confidences and who had just proved through his kindness he was more aware of her than

she'd imagined.

And, in the blink of an eye, Jocelyn fell in love. Real love.

She'd thought she'd known what love was. She'd believed she'd experienced it before. After all, she'd known Thomas for years and had only known Michael for the span of two days. But being familiar with someone and being friends was not the same as passionate love . . . and she definitely felt passion for Michael.

What she felt for him was a thunderbolt, a flood of emotions, a maelstrom of conviction . . . and it was a need to be with him and never let him go.

They sat down to dinner. Jocelyn discovered she was aware of every move Michael made. He liked the ham, the peas,

and the cider she'd pressed herself last fall. He ate with calm deliberateness and she wanted to feed him every day of his life. She wanted him here, across from her at a table where she would be content to hear the sound of his voice, to marvel at even the slightest gesture, and to bask in the strength of his companionship.

Uncle Geoffrey was very animated, more so than she'd ever seen him. He liked Michael—and his approval made her love all the more wonderful.

Just when supper was about to end, Uncle Geoff cleared his throat and said, "Josie, I have a surprise for you. I've purchased a dress from Mrs. Jeter for you to wear to the ball."

Michael did not give away, by any sign

or look, that he was behind the gift. Thomas could never have set aside his own pride long enough to be so generous and Jocelyn fell even deeper in love. “Thank you, Uncle,” she murmured, but her gaze was on Michael.

He sensed her regard and looked up. For a long moment, their eyes held. All she could think about was the kisses they had shared, kisses that held the promise of other things . . . and she found herself wondering if he, too, felt this attraction between them. He had to; the very air in the room seemed to vibrate with it.

“You deserve the dress and more,” Uncle Geoff started proudly, and then stopped. He looked from one to the other and then whispered, “Oh, dear.”

His soft words of worry brought Jocelyn to her senses. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?” she replied, a bit too brightly.

“Nothing of importance,” her uncle answered and then became very interested in getting his peas onto his fork.

Michael commented on Jocelyn’s flowers and the conversation flowed smoothly again as she discovered he, too, had a love for working the earth. “You sound like a farmer,” she teased him.

“I am,” he admitted.

“A farmer who likes to sell tea?”

His expression sobered. “I grew up on an estate. It was a good boyhood and I hope to offer the same life to my children someday.”

Children, a family, roots. He’d described

heaven to someone who was an orphan.

“Perhaps you would like to take a turn in the garden after dinner?” she suggested, offering them a chance to be alone . . . and, yes, possibly to have another kiss.

His silvery eyes met hers and she knew he was thinking the same thing. The tension tightened between them. “I would like that very much,” he answered and for a moment, it was as if no one else was in the room with them.

Her uncle interjected. “Actually, I believe we need an early night.” He even leaned forward as if to come between her and Michael. Jocelyn wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d waved his hand in front of their faces. “Don’t you think, Donaldson? Time to turn in?”

Michael couldn't ignore such an obvious hint. He smiled regretfully at Jocelyn and she sighed. "Yes," he agreed, "I don't want to overstay my welcome."

They rose from the table and Jocelyn walked Michael to the door, her uncle trailing behind her, his ears attuned to everything being said. After so many years of careless attention, he'd obviously decided to become a doting chaperon in one night.

"Thank you for dinner," Michael said.

"You're very welcome," Jocelyn answered and offered her hand. Michael took it and kissed the tips of her fingers. For a moment, neither of them could move. She was too lost in the wonder of newly discovered love. She prayed he felt the

same.

“Good night, Donaldson,” Uncle Geoff said jovially but firmly, opening the door and handing their guest his hat.

Michael had no choice but to take his leave. He did not go without one last lingering look at Jocelyn. It was that look that proved to be her undoing; with her newly discovered love, she didn’t think she could bear for even the space of one night to be parted from him.

Once the door closed, she collapsed on one of the stair treads, overcome with the prospect of happiness.

“You like him,” Uncle Geoff said, his reservations clear on his face.

“I like him very much. Don’t you?” Michael and her uncle had seemed to be

getting along, especially when they had conspired over the dress.

Uncle Geoff frowned. “We don’t know very much about him. He has a bit too much presence to my way of thinking to be a simple tea merchant.”

Jocelyn didn’t want to hear doubts, even those she’d expressed to herself. “What else could he be?”

“I don’t know,” her uncle said.

“I sense he is a gentleman,” she ventured.

“Absolutely,” Uncle Geoff agreed and then added somberly, “He is promised to another.”

Jocelyn had been trying to ignore that fact. Deep in her heart, she wanted to believe all obstacles could be overcome. And Michael never spoke about this other

woman. She sensed with a woman's intuition that perhaps he wasn't as firm in his convictions as he had originally thought. Or was her natural optimism encouraging her to believe their love was possible?

For right now, she pushed doubts aside. She just wanted to embrace and enjoy the euphoria of love.

Uncle Geoff sighed, a sign he knew better than to press the issue. Still, he said, "You know I love you, don't you, Josie? Even though I'm somewhat of an absentminded old goat? In my mind, you are my daughter."

"I've always known you loved me, Uncle. And I shall cherish the dress. It is a very special gift."

He smiled, pleased. "You have been a

gift in my life.” He lightly touched her head, a gesture he’d often made when she’d been a child. “Well, I’m ready for my bed. I shouldn’t have fallen asleep in my chair last night. My back hurts. I plan to straighten it out tonight.”

“Go on up. I’ll be close behind you.”

“Good night.”

She quickly cleaned up from dinner, blew out the candles, and followed him up the stairs. She went into her room, but was too excited to sleep, not with Michael on her mind. Instead, she sat on the deep ledge of the window overlooking her garden—and noticed a movement in the shadows of the house.

Jocelyn leaned forward, craning her neck to see just as Michael took a step out into

the moonlight and then quickly hid himself again. He stood by her uncle's study windows and a second later, she heard the sound of wood against wood as a window was opened.

Chapter Thirteen



Moonlit Encounter

Michael had a problem—he still loved Ivy, or so he reminded himself . . . but he couldn't stop thinking about Jocelyn.

Again, tonight, he'd spent time around a table and was reminded of being with his family. What he had tossed aside so callously years ago, now meant something to him. And his parents, his brothers and sisters would all adore Jocelyn if they were ever to meet her.

Nor did Kenyon strike Michael as a thief. The man was very forthcoming about his experiments—even his work with rubber, leaving William's motives suspect.

Michael had always prided himself on his sense of honor. For Ivy's hand, he'd undertaken the most havey-cavey of escapades and he felt he'd compromised not only his reputation but perhaps his heart as well.

There was only one way to discover the truth to this situation, and that was to take a look at the formula for himself. If it were Sir William's, it would be in his flowing script.

Michael decided to break into Kenyon's laboratory.

He wasn't going to make the same mistake he had the night before. This time, he hid in the line of woods bordering the property until he saw all the lights go out in Kenyon's house and he believed they were asleep.

Carefully, he moved through the shadows to the laboratory windows. To his good fortune, he found one that was open a crack. Straining his eyes, he peered into all the corners to make sure Kenyon wasn't asleep in a chair like he'd been the night before. The good-size red leather chair in a corner was empty and there were no bearlike snores to disturb the night.

Michael eased the window up, lifted himself onto the sill, and climbed inside. He started combing through the papers on the desk. He soon began to recognize Kenyon's squiggly writing but the formula could be anywhere. Kenyon was an eccentric thinker and had a habit of sticking notes and papers between the pages of books he had stacked all over his laboratory.

Perhaps the formula was over on the table Kenyon used for work? Michael started leafing through the papers there and was so busy, he didn't hear a footfall until it was too late.

He looked up, suddenly aware he wasn't alone.

Jocelyn stood inside the doorway. Her glorious curls were down around her shoulders and she wore nothing save for a thin cotton nightgown with a shawl thrown over her shoulders. Her feet were bare.

She didn't appear surprised to see him. "This is the second time I've caught you snooping, Michael. What is it you want?"

He cleared his throat. "This isn't what it seems."

Her shrewd glance took in the open

window. “You didn’t come in through the door.”

“I didn’t want to wake you.”

“How polite,” she returned coldly “Why are you searching my uncle’s laboratory?”

There it was, the dreaded question. A thousand lies leapt his lips . . . but he chose the truth. “I was searching for the formula to adhere rubber to cloth.”

She obviously hadn’t been expecting that answer. “Why?”

“Jocelyn, please hear me out and I’ll tell you everything.”

“You’re not a tea merchant.”

“God, no. I’m a military officer.” It felt good to say those words, to be who he was.

She pulled the shawl tighter around her. “And your name is not Donaldson, is it?”

“No.” She’d suspected. Her intelligence was keener than he had imagined. “It’s Sanson. Michael Sanson.” And then, because he wanted her to know, he added, “*Colonel* Michael Sanson.”

“Ah,” she cooed before adding softly, “and the army sent you here because they are afraid Napoleon had escaped again and could be found in my uncle’s laboratory?”

He deserved her sarcasm. “I’ve reason to believe your uncle stole a formula from another scientist.”

Her reaction was immediate. She walked right up to him. “He’d never do such a thing! Who made such a vile accusation?”

“Sir William Lewin.”

“The man you asked me about earlier?”

Michael nodded.

“The name means nothing to me.”

“Your uncle’s path must have crossed his at one time or the other. Otherwise your uncle wouldn’t have the formula.”

She shook her head. “My uncle would never steal another man’s work. He’s been asked to *help* others solve problems but he’d never claimed work that wasn’t his as his own. This Sir William must be lying. Besides, I know a Mr. Redding requested his help and sent the basics of the formula to him.”

Michael seized the opportunity to persuade her. “That’s why I’m here. I want to know the truth.”

Jocelyn wasn’t that gullible. “So you steal into a man’s house and expect *him* to prove your unfounded suspicions are

wrong?” He knew she was seeing him with new eyes. Gone was the softness and in its place was suspicion and doubt. “There’s more to this than is on the surface.”

“It is as I told you.” He needed her to believe him.

She took a step back. “You want me to trust you,” she said quietly, “even though you came to Wye to rob my uncle—”

“Robbery is too strong a word.”

She almost laughed, the sound bitter. “Or not strong enough. Because, everything you’ve done, from letting a room from Lucy and Kent to spending time with me, has been a scheme to gain the formula, hasn’t it?”

He did not want her to form this conclusion. “No. Not quite. I mean, I can

explain, Jocelyn.”

She wasn’t in the mood for explanations. “And the kisses last night—! It was a ruse. Thomas probably wasn’t even there. You were going to break in then and I discovered you.”

“I hadn’t intended on kissing you. What happened between us—none of that was planned.”

“No, of course not,” she agreed brittlely. “I was supposed to be snug in my bed while you rifled my uncle’s possessions.”

“Jocelyn—”

“I *trusted* you.” Her words damned him. “I was starting to fall in—” She broke off, unable to speak the thought . . . but he knew what she had been about to admit. She’d started to fall in love with him, and he felt

like the blackest of scoundrels. He'd always done what was right, what was honorable.

Michael stepped forward, coming around the table toward her. He wanted to reassure her, to touch her and make amends. "You *can* trust me. I merely want the truth."

"Get away from me!" She backed toward the door, her eyes angry glints. "You don't have to apologize. You said your affections were spoken for. My gullibility is my problem. However, I must fetch my uncle. He will want the magistrate to see to you."

The magistrate! Michael did not want the authorities involved. He was feeling foolish enough as it was. She started out the door, but he reached out, snagging her arm, drawing her back.

A hand on each arm, he said, “You must listen to me, Jocelyn—”

She kicked him firmly in the shins with her bare feet and attempted to jerk herself out of his hold.

He grunted, but he was not really hurt. Catching her by the wrist, he prevented her from running from the room. “Jocelyn, please—”

She started to scream. He instantly cut off the sound by placing his hand over her mouth, avoiding her sharp teeth. Kicking shut the laboratory door, he moved the two of them to the leather retiring couch and unceremoniously dropped her onto it. He leaned over to angrily inform her, “I’m not here to hurt you, so stop behaving like a madwoman.”

Her answer was to raise her knee and almost unman him. She hit his thigh with bruising force and pulled back, ready to try again. He fell on her, trapping her thrashing legs and holding them in place.

She glared at him, their faces so close together they breathed the same air. He saw the fear and pain of betrayal in her eyes . . . and the desire.

Suddenly, he was aware she wore nothing beneath her nightdress, that the hem was up to her waist, and that they were very alone. Lust as he'd never known it before replaced anger.

“Jocelyn,” he said, the musical sound of her name his benediction, his request begging her to understand. Then, slowly, he leaned forward and kissed her.

She could have turned away. She could have rejected him. She didn't.

Instead, she held herself very still, the small frown between her eyes that he'd come to know as concern. It was as if she did not trust herself.

As for himself, he was dangerously close to the point when he would not be able to turn back. From the moment he'd laid eyes on her, he'd wanted her. Her skin was soft and smooth, and the scent of woman filled his senses.

Still, she resisted. He wanted her to understand. He needed her forgiveness. He deepened his kiss, searching for a response.

And he received one.

With a sigh, she gave in. Her lips parted and her arms slid up around his neck. She

drew him down to her.

Michael wanted to shout joyful hosannas. He would explain and she would understand now . . . but as their mouths melded together, explanation ceased to be important. And when she lightly stroked him with her tongue, he was lost.

The man who prided himself on control vanished. In his place was a man who had one simple need—Jocelyn. He wanted her with a passion that bordered on the savage.

Perhaps if she had struggled. Perhaps if she'd protested or let him know in word or deed that she wished him to stop, he could have.

But she didn't.

Instead, she became a willing accomplice to her seduction. She offered no protest as

he slipped her nightdress down around her shoulders, the shawl having fallen away when she'd first landed in the couch. He cupped her breast, reveling in the firm weight of it. Her nipples were bold and proud . . . perfect. He broke the kiss and took one into his mouth.

Jocelyn cried out his name in surprise and then pleasure. Her hands tugged at his jacket, his neckcloth, his shirt, as if not wanting any barriers between them. Michael bent her to his will, not hesitating in showing her the joys of lovemaking. And bless her, she offered herself to him with soft sighs and sweet moans of passion and gratitude.

Who cared about science and formulas and petty betrayals when he had such a magnificent, responsive creature in his arms?

One that at this moment he'd give his life to possess?

He began unbuttoning his breeches.



Jocelyn no longer recognized herself. Every muscle, every nerve in her body yearned for what only he could give her. She'd never known this edginess or that this need existed inside her. It had lain dormant all this time to be unlocked by his kiss.

She knew what was happening. She understood the functions of the body and she wanted this joining. She couldn't seem to stop herself; it felt too good.

Anticipation hummed through her. She felt him free himself, felt his hardness press against her. Her body glowed with internal

heat and a need to be filled.

“Michael,” she whispered and instinctively curved herself to receive him.

He needed no further invitation. With one smooth thrust, he broke through the barrier of her maidenhead and buried himself deep inside.

For a beat, neither one of them could move. She'd felt a small tear but nothing uncomfortable. Her body adjusted to the feel of him. Her heart pounded in her chest.

His voice near her ear, he asked, “Are you all right?”

“Is this all? Is it done?”

He laughed, obviously pleased. “No, love, it is only beginning.”

He began moving then, long, slow thrusts that filled her being. He was gentle at first

with many kisses and soft, sweet words of encouragement. But then his lust began to mount. His movements became more demanding, more in need of her passion.

She moved to accommodate the shock of his thrusts and found her own yearning enjoyment in each new, incredible sensation. Michael knew what she needed. He created a bond between them, one she wanted to have go on forever.

Her blood grew heated. Her body ached for something she could not define. She arched against him, calling his name, fearful and excited at the same time, the intensity building—

The ecstasy caught her by surprise.

One moment she struggled and in the next she'd never been more alive. She hugged

Michael tightly, afraid and exalted all at once.

He whispered her name and she heard in his voice the same wonder she felt, the same loss of control. It made her feel powerful. And when he buried himself to the hilt, spilling his seed deep within her, the forceful vibrancy of life passing between, she knew they had become one . . . and she was complete.

Neither moved. They couldn't. They lay intertwined, savoring the closeness. The wild beating of their hearts slowed.

Jocelyn stared up at the ceiling, her arms around Michael, her whole being sparkling with joy. She smoothed her hand over his back. He still wore his jacket, his neckcloth was hopelessly misconstrued, and his

breeches were down around his knees. And she was naked save for her nightdress around her waist like a sash.

Michael raised himself up on his elbows and looked down at her, the expression in his eyes unreadable.

“I didn’t expect that,” he said.

“I didn’t know such a thing existed,” she admitted.

Her words spurred his conscience. “Dear God, what have I done?” he whispered.

He would have risen, but she tightened her arms around him. “Please, don’t. Not this minute. I don’t want to think of consequences. I don’t want regrets.”

The light in his eyes softened, moonlight and shadows outlining the hard, masculine planes of his face. He gathered her in his

arms. “You’re beautiful.”

Jocelyn closed her eyes and smiled with pleasure. “I *feel* beautiful.”

Michael nuzzled her neck. “No pain?”

She’d been warned the first time was supposed to be horrid. Even Lucy had confided she’d needed several glasses of wine to relax her before she’d finally succumbed to Kent. “I felt nothing but pleasure.”

His lips curved into a smile against her skin. He covered her breast with his hand and her nipple tightened against his palm. “This is madness,” he murmured with a soft sigh.

She curled her fingers in his hair. “It’s the moonlight.”

“Aye, only the moonlight.” He kissed the

tender skin beneath her jawline and she felt him rouse again, pressing against her.

He didn't ask permission. None was needed. He entered her, the movement smooth and strong. Gone was the earlier urgency and need. He took his time. His lovemaking was tender and yet more intense.

Jocelyn gave herself over to him. She now knew what to expect and craved the pleasure she knew was coming. Michael whispered encouragement, urging her to fulfillment. And when at last she found it, he joined her on the crest and together they drifted to earth, wrapped in each other's arms.

"Is it always like this?" she said, dazed.

"It's *never* been like this," he answered.

His confession made her proud. This was right between them. She'd not have any regrets. In less than a week, he had revolutionized her world. She'd fallen in love and become a woman.

Michael lifted his head, listening.

In a second, she heard the sound of steps coming down the staircase. "My uncle." Panic froze her, but not Michael.

Swiftly, he rose, pulling her nightdress back up around her shoulders. He grabbed her shawl and threw it around her. She pushed her hem down to her ankles.

Taking her face in her hands, he said, "I will see you tomorrow morning. First thing. We have matters to discuss." He gave her a quick, hard kiss and then he rose, pulling up his breeches as he moved. "I will make

everything right,” he promised. “You’re mine now. Do you understand? *Mine.*”

She nodded, too rattled to think.

“Put your arms through the sleeves of your gown,” he ordered, his silver eyes alive with laughter. She scrambled to comply.

The footsteps ended. The handle to the door turned and Michael jumped out the window into the garden in one fluid movement that ended in a soft grunt of pain.

The door opened and her uncle entered, holding a candle.

He didn’t notice her at first. Muttering to himself, he walked to his worktable, set down the candle and paused. He stiffened and slowly turned to look directly at her.

She gripped the shawl tightly around her.

“Why, Jocelyn, what are you doing here?”

“The window was open.” She offered no more explanation and Uncle Geoff didn’t seem to need one.

“So it is,” he said. “I must have forgotten to close it when Vicar Banks came by today.”

He started for the window. With a hop and a skip, Jocelyn beat him there. “I’ll close it,” she said, fearing he’d see Michael outside. But when she looked, her lover was gone.

Gone.

He’d said he would be back. First thing in the morning.

Jocelyn tried not to listen to doubts. “Good night, Uncle,” she murmured.

His mind was already back to his experiments. She left the room.

Upstairs, she went to her bedroom window and looked out over the garden. She saw no movement, no sign of Michael.

Suddenly, the enormity of what had happened, what had transpired between them, hit her.

“Sanson,” she said out loud, recalling his true name and wishing him here all at the same time. Dear God, what had she done? What if he did not return in the morning?

Jocelyn climbed into her bed, pulling the sheets up over her. He’d meant what he’d said. She had to trust him, to believe. If not, the betrayal would cut her to the bone.



Michael hurriedly righted his clothes as he walked away from the house. He'd barely escaped being caught. Other men bragged about flying out the window of a woman's boudoir before a husband or chaperon walked in—but Michael had never thought to be one of their number.

What had come over him?

He who had always known his own mind was now confused. Jocelyn had cut right through the control on which he'd always prided himself.

Furthermore, theirs had been no ordinary coupling. He'd heard the poets claim the earth could move during lovemaking, but he'd never experienced it—until now. He'd had her twice and even wanted her again. He didn't think he'd ever tire of her.

Of course, now that he'd compromised her, he'd have to marry her—

Michael stopped dead in his tracks, right there in the middle of the road.

He *had* compromised her.

She'd been a virgin—a willing one, but untouched all the same. He must marry her. It was the honorable thing to do.

Marriage. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, attempting to change his mental image of the word. He'd always pictured himself with Ivy.

Now, he couldn't remember Ivy's face.

He'd started off on this fool's errand to win her hand and instead, he'd found something else. Something finer, more brilliant, more satisfying.

He'd found Jocelyn.

This was not how he had foreseen his life, but having Jocelyn by his side—in his bed—would not be a bad thing. Not at all.

His moment of panic abated. He had no choice, he told himself. He had to offer marriage.

He even started whistling as he made his way to the Lettmans'. He would talk to Jocelyn in the morning and explain everything. He had no doubt she would accept his offer. What other choice did she have?

Of course, there was the matter of Ivy, but at this moment, on a starry, moonlit night with the music of crickets and bullfrogs in the air, the haughty Ivy seemed a lifetime away.

Instead, in his mind there was only

Jocelyn.

And he slept well on his decision. In fact, he slept better than he had in years.

He even *overslept*.

Chapter Fourteen



The Twists of Fate

Jocelyn did not sleep well.

She alternated between dreams of being in Michael's arms and fears of being abandoned by him. As an orphan, she'd learned at a young age that love could be irretrievably lost. Thomas's defection had reinforced those deep-seated fears. Now, morning couldn't come soon enough for her to find out if Michael would keep his promises.

She woke early, bathed, dressed and came downstairs.

Still in robe and nightcap, her uncle was snoring in the leather chair in his laboratory.

He'd obviously been up late, which wasn't unusual for him. His worktable was a mess. She knew she'd have to tell him about Michael's snooping. She didn't know how he would take the information, but she would hear Michael out first.

In the kitchen, she put water on to boil. The hour was only half past eight. Michael would not be there for quite some time. Jocelyn made herself a cup of tea hoping to calm her jangled nerves—and yet it served to remind her of Michael's false profession.

She took her teacup out into the garden. The day promised to be sweet and clear. She sat on the wooden bench in the garden's center and watched a spider weave a web across the tips of a lavender shrub.

If she closed her eyes, she could

remember the feeling of Michael deep within her and remember the expression of exaltation on his face as they'd discovered passion together. She clasped her hands around her teacup.

He would come.

He'd promised.

"Jocelyn?"

Her heart skipped a beat. She stood, fearing her imagination played a trick on her. A footstep sounded on the flagstone path leading around the house.

"Jocelyn?" There was no mistaking that someone had called her name, but now she recognized the voice. It was Thomas.

He came around the corner of the house and hurried up to her. He did not look good. His eyes were red-rimmed from lack of

sleep. He'd shaved but done a poor job of it, as if he'd been in a hurry.

When he saw her, he pulled his flat-brimmed hat off his head and stood for a moment like a penitent, hopeful and earnest.

“Thomas, what is wrong?”

For a moment, words seemed to fail him and then he said, “I love you. I can't marry Elfreda. You are the one I've always wanted.”

His words vibrated in the air between them and then he started laughing, obviously relieved by the confession.

“I love you,” he stated again, louder this time and with more conviction. “I was a fool, a blind fool.” He started toward her, his arms wide. “I'm sorry for all the hurt I've caused you. I don't know how I could

have been so misguided as to take the love we had for each other for granted.”

Numb, Jocelyn heard him as if from a great distance. She took a step back, holding him at bay. “But what about Lady Elfreda?”

Thomas’s happiness faded a bit; he stopped short. “Well, there is a problem there. I haven’t told her my feelings have changed, of course. I don’t know what to say. I thought, first I’d talk to you and we could manage a solution. After all, the betrothal hasn’t been announced yet.”

She was to provide him with a solution?
“The ball will be tomorrow night. Everyone in the village is planning to be there. Are you saying you would subject her to public humiliation?”

“Jocelyn, she’s never given a fig for your feelings.”

Jocelyn nodded. *When had Thomas grown so arrogant—or had he always been this way?* She’d never imagined him to be one to trounce happily on others’ feelings.

He continued on, assuming she agreed with him. “Of course, the hard one to break the news to will be Mother.” He laughed nervously. “She will be disappointed, perhaps bitterly so. It turns out she’s never quite approved of you because of that nonsense of you being an orphan and not having a dowry.”

“I know.”

“You knew?” He acted surprised. “I didn’t until I offered for Elfreda, and, well,

Mother let her true feelings be known then.”

How could Thomas have been so dense? His mother had always disapproved of Jocelyn. Yes, at one time her animosity had been better hidden than it was now . . . but it had always been there.

Thomas continued boldly. “I shall tell her she must accept you or go to live with her sister in Bath. My house will be your house and she will have no choice.”

Now, Jocelyn really felt terrible. Mrs. Burkhardt and her sister could barely abide each other. The gossips still buzzed over the fights they used to have when they were younger and lived under the same roof. “Your mother has never lived anyplace in her life save Wye.”

“I’ve thought this through,” he insisted

with a dismissive wave. “I’m setting the rules and Mother will do as you say if she wants to stay.”

Yes, and she’d simmer with smoldering resentment and probably make her daughter-in-law’s life a living hell.

Jocelyn shook her head with disbelief. If he’d come to her Monday last with such an offer, she would have snapped it up.

Now the idea of living the rest of her life with an aggrieved mother-in-law and a man who could jilt *another* girl without one ounce of sensitivity to her feelings left her cold. Thomas was not the man she had thought he was. Maybe he had never been.

And then there was the fact that Jocelyn had given herself to another. Thomas would not be happy with anything less than a virgin

bride, because that is what he thought real love was—having a wife as a possession.

Michael would not be that way. She knew it in her heart.

He reached out to her again. Deftly, she sidestepped his arms, placing the bench between them. “What caused you to change your mind?” she asked, curious.

“Several things. I suppose jealousy, most of all.” He gave her a boyish grin, one that used to melt her heart into forgiving him anything and now struck her as a bit irritating. “When I heard that the tea peddler was buying you a dress, I almost went wild.”

“But he didn’t buy the dress,” Jocelyn quickly informed him, latching on to the lie Michael and Uncle Geoff had invented.

“My uncle did.”

“That’s not what the Clark sisters are saying and they received the story straight from Mrs. Jeter,” he said patronizingly—and that, too, was annoying.

“Yes, but it is what the facts are.” Or would be as soon as her uncle went down to Mrs. Jeter’s shop and made the arrangements.

For a second, Thomas appeared ready to argue the point, but then changed his mind. “Whatever you say,” he agreed pompously. “It doesn’t matter anyway. There will be no ball.”

“What of the expense Lord Vaughn has gone to on your behalf?”

Thomas’s smile held no remorse. “Would you be happier if I married Elfreda, a

woman I didn't love?"

"But you were going to do exactly that," Jocelyn said quietly.

He frowned, unaccustomed to self-introspection. Of course, in the past, she would never have commented on his shortcomings. He had been her stability, her lifeline—until he'd left her and her eyes were opened.

She realized that over the past two days she'd discovered she had learned new strengths. Fickleness was not a quality she wanted in a man. Had Lucy not tried to warn her?

Still a part of her, the part that held close to her childhood, had strong feelings for Thomas, feelings that begged to be resolved. She knew of only one way to do

it. "Thomas, kiss me."

Her request startled him. "Right now?"

"Yes."

"Jocelyn, it's morning. Why, only a bit past nine. What if your uncle strolls by?"

"Then we tell him the happy news." She set her teacup down on the bench, silently daring him.

"A kiss," he muttered and she wondered why he hesitated. Michael would have the deed done by now.

Thomas came to his decision. "Very well. One kiss. Then we must go make our happy announcement." He started to step around the bench but she moved away. She needed a bit of space between them.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. They felt like lead weights. She moved

back. “I don’t want a peck like what we usually do,” she instructed. “I want a *kiss*.”

“A kiss,” he echoed, then pulled her up into his arms, the bench still between them. His mouth came down over hers, just as Michael’s had . . . except Thomas’s mouth was closed. He mashed hard lips to hers in an imitation of ardor—and she instantly knew she could not marry him.

Once upon a time, Thomas’s kisses had been enough. Now she wanted the passion Michael’s kisses inspired.

Thomas pulled back. “There. Good?”

Jocelyn struggled not to wipe her mouth.

“Come along,” he said. “Let us go find your uncle.” He took her hand, but she didn’t follow. Instead, she held her ground, an arm’s length between them. “I can’t

marry you, Thomas. I won't." The moment she spoke the words, her soul felt lighter.

"What?" He half-laughed in disbelief. "Wait. You're angry. You are upset because I had jilted you for Elfreda and now you are paying me back."

"No," Jocelyn said softly, hating to say the words but knowing they must be said. "I can't marry you, Thomas. My affections have shifted."

"But you've always loved me!"

Her mouth went dry. She understood the hurt he was feeling. "I did. I loved you once . . . but you left me and now, I've found someone else."

"The tea peddler?" he demanded, incredulous. "He just arrived in Wye. You know nothing about him."

“I know he is kind.” Yes, she did know that.

“What sort of quality is that in a man?” Thomas shot back. “Kindness.” He said the word as if it left a bad taste his mouth.

In the face of his mockery, Jocelyn found her equilibrium. “It’s a quality I admire,” she returned, a touch of steel in her voice, and she felt the stirrings of her temper.

He forced a laugh. “You would turn me down for a peddler’s life.”

“Yes,” she said decisively. “Yes, I would. Good-bye, Thomas. We shall not speak of this conversation again. I shall see you tomorrow night at your ball and will congratulate you when your betrothal is announced.”

His response was to kick the bench,

sending the teacup flying. “You did all this knowingly. You wanted to see me grovel.”

“No, I have never wanted to see you hurt,” she flashed back. “Thomas, we were part of each other’s childhood. Perhaps if our young love for each other had never been broken, matters would be different. However, *you* are the one who made the choice and you were wise. I see that now. Lady Elfreda adores you. Her family is going to honor you tomorrow night and your marriage will be the talk of the parish.” She lightly touched his arm. He jerked it back, but she knew he listened. “The reason you are here today is because before you could face the future, you had to make sure the past was truly behind you.”

As the truth of her words sank in, the

anger evaporated from his eyes. In its place was sadness. "I did love you, Jocelyn."

"And I loved you . . . however, we outgrew each other." He nodded and then with a deep breath, placed his hat on his head, setting it at a cocky angle. He smiled and said, "Well, at least Mother will be happy."

Jocelyn couldn't help an answering smile. "She will."

"I never meant to hurt you, Jocelyn."

"I know."

He took a step back. "I shall see you tomorrow evening?"

"I wouldn't miss this ball," she said, and meant the words.

Then, to her surprise, he came over, bent, and gave her a brotherly kiss on the cheek.

Without a further word, he left.

Jocelyn watched him leave. This was a bittersweet moment, but an exciting one, too. Her future lay ahead.

The back door opened. Uncle Geoff came out on the step. He was still wearing his robe, slippers, and nightcap.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Did you hear any of it?”

“How could I not? You both woke me from a sound sleep with all that prattling about kisses.” He paused, then asked, “You do not regret losing him?”

“No.”

“And so it is the peddler?”

Jocelyn looked to her uncle and knew she should tell him the truth about Michael—but didn’t.

She told herself it was because Michael should be the one to explain all to Uncle Geoff. Of course, the truth was that her faith, her trust in love, had already been shaken by Thomas, a man she'd known most of her life. Michael was a stranger and even admitted he'd made her acquaintance under false pretenses. His true interest had been to get close to Uncle Geoff. And, yet, she told herself his goal had changed, that he truly cared for her.

After all, she'd given him not only her trust, she'd given him her heart. Heat rose in her cheeks as she remembered what had happened.

She prayed she hadn't been played for a fool.

"You don't look well, Josie," Uncle

Geoff commented with concern. He came down a step.

She raised her hand to overheated cheeks. "I need to go see Lucy." Enough of waiting. She had to talk to Michael. She had to see his face in the morning light and know his feelings for her were true.

She started past Uncle Geoff to get her hat, gloves, and shawl.

He stopped her, gently touching her arm. "Is it wise?" In his gaze, she could see he knew more than what she'd thought he did.

"I must see him," she murmured, and slipped inside.



Michael's first waking thought was of Jocelyn and the sex.

She had a passion that matched his own. He wanted her in his bed and he wanted to spend hours enjoying her.

Furthermore, now that he'd made the commitment in his mind, marriage to her would be much easier than marriage to Ivy. He was actually surprised at how effortlessly he was able to shift his devotion from a woman he'd worshiped for years to one he'd only known for days.

Ah, but there was something vital and alive about Jocelyn, something Ivy didn't have. Yes, that was it. Fate had intervened and instead of marrying a pampered ice princess, he craved Jocelyn's warmth and vibrancy. He even liked the village of Wye.

This solution would also save him from his ill-advised mission to take the formula

from Kenyon. Let Sir William perform his own subterfuge. Michael was glad to be free of the nonsense.

But he was wasting time. He knew Jocelyn would be anxiously waiting for him. They had much to discuss and he couldn't wait to see the expression on her face when he made his offer of marriage.

He dressed quickly, taking extra time with his shaving, and headed downstairs.

Lucy met him in the vestibule, but instead of her usual cheery good morning, she said quietly "You have visitors. They are waiting for you in the sitting room."

If it had been Jocelyn, her uncle, or anyone from the village, he sensed she would have said their names. "Who are they?"

“An older man and a young woman. They would not identify themselves because they said they wanted you to be surprised.”

The military man in Michael hated surprises. He murmured “thank you.” He couldn’t imagine who was calling and then wondered if it could be Burkhardt, except Lucy would have said as much.

He crossed the few steps to the sitting room and then stopped in astonishment. Sir William sat on Lucy’s couch, holding a cup of coffee in his hand. “Donaldson,” he greeted Michael cheerfully. “Are you surprised?”

“Absolutely,” Michael answered and then let his gaze drift over to Ivy, who stood by the fireplace looking more

beautiful than ever.

She smiled, her expression tentative and he caught himself holding his breath, waiting for the rush of desire he usually felt whenever he saw her.

Chapter Fifteen



Miss Kenyon Meets Lady Elfreda's Cousin

Jocelyn knocked on Lucy's kitchen door. There was no answer. Impatient, she turned the handle and went inside. "Lucy?"

Her friend came to the doorway between the hall and the kitchen. She held a finger over her lips, urging Jocelyn to silence, then motioned her to follow.

As they tiptoed toward the sitting room, Lucy said, "Mr. Donaldson has visitors." She led Jocelyn to the edge of the staircase where they could shamelessly eavesdrop without being detected.

Jocelyn leaned around the banister,

craning her neck to see inside the sitting room. Michael's back blocked the doorway. "It's a man and woman, a beautiful woman who is so similar in looks to Lady Elfreda, it is uncanny," Lucy told her quietly "They're obviously quality although they did not give me their names. They know Mr. Donaldson very well."

Turning her attention to what was being said in the sitting room, Jocelyn heard Michael ask, "What are you doing here?" He did not sound pleased.

A hearty male voice answered, "We had an occasion to visit. My brother is holding a betrothal ball in honor of his daughter tomorrow night and invited us. I realized this was a perfect opportunity for you and me to meet without anyone being the wiser."

“What was wrong with London?” Michael asked.

There was a slight hesitation before the gentleman answered, “The walls have ears in London. Here the two of us can talk.”

“Good. I have questions for you,” Michael said, walking into the room, and Jocelyn caught a glimpse of the man. He was of moderate height with intense eyes, and a receding hairline he attempted to conceal by combing all his hair forward. He wore an overlong velvet jacket as if he were a character in a Chaucer story.

“Such as?” the man asked.

“Geoffrey Kenyon has never heard of you before, Sir William. How can he steal from a man whom he does not know?”

Sir William, the man who had falsely

accused her uncle. Jocelyn edged closer toward the door to hear his response. Lucy tried to draw her back, but Jocelyn shook her off.

“Did he tell you that?” Sir William answered lazily. “He’s lying.”

The accusation stung Jocelyn to the quick. Throwing caution to the wind, she stepped from hiding and charged into the room to confront the man. “My uncle never lies.”

Sir William frowned. “Who is this?”

Jocelyn didn’t give Michael a chance to answer. “I’m Geoffrey Kenyon’s niece and I have worked on his correspondence over the years. I want to know why you wish to claim my uncle and Mr. Redding’s research as your own?”

Sir William stood. "You are misguided," he replied stiffly. "I started experimenting with rubber years ago."

"That doesn't mean this particular formula is yours," she answered.

"It means I have some claim to the results," Sir William said.

Michael stepped between them. "Enough. Let us take this to Kenyon and see what he says. It is what you should have done in the beginning, Sir William."

"Yes," Jocelyn agreed. "And I am certain the Royal Society will also want a part in arbitrating this dispute."

"The Royal Society," Sir William said with disgust. "If they had allowed me to present my paper the way they should have, my claim would have been established."

“Either way, we will talk to Kenyon,” Michael said.

“And what about *us*?” a melodious female voice said from the other side of the room.

Jocelyn turned toward the sound. She had been so incensed by Sir William’s false claims, she’d not noticed the woman standing by the fireplace. For a second, she thought Lady Elfreda was in the room . . . except this woman was more lovely—and more certain of her own beauty.

The woman crossed to Michael and slipped her arm possessively through his. “What about the promises you made to me?” she purred up to him.

“Yes, what about those?” Sir William echoed, the light of a thousand devils in his

eyes. “You asked for my daughter’s hand in marriage and I offered it to you provided you help return my formula to me. You do know he is here under false pretenses, don’t you?” he said to Jocelyn. “The fake name and all that nonsense. A little subterfuge.”

“Which was your idea,” Michael said in his defense.

“He told me all,” Jocelyn managed to croak out . . . and she was glad she knew even as she felt completely betrayed. She stared at their entwined arms and felt dowdy beyond all belief. There was no way she could compete with such a creature, and it wasn’t just the woman’s looks. She was dressed in the height of fashion. She’d probably paid more for the dress she was wearing than Jocelyn spent

for a year's worth of clothing.

Michael attempted to pull away. "Jocelyn, please, I have to explain."

"That we are to be married?" Sir William's daughter asked, cuddling closer. She met Jocelyn's gaze with such a superior, dismissive air it made Jocelyn angry. The woman was laughing at her!

Well, she'd not stand here and take it. "He's told me all," she coolly informed the beauty. "And you are welcome to him." She took a step back toward the door.

Michael followed her, the beauty laughing as she took his hand and held him back. "Please, Jocelyn, we talked about this last night."

"I don't think I understood the depth of your commitment," Jocelyn said. "Or my

response would have been different.” She slid her gaze to Sir William’s daughter. “Very different.”

Like the she-cat she was, the beauty agreed, “Yes, we *are* very different.”

Jocelyn didn’t make another response. Instead, she wrapped herself in her pride, turned on her heel, and left the room, walking out the front door without a backward glance.



Michael swore softly and shook off Ivy’s arm. “You’ve barely given me a moment of your time since I returned to England and now you latch on to me like a leech?”

Her smile hardened. “What’s mine I keep.”

“She’s a bit spoiled that way, lad,” Sir William agreed.

“Yours?” Michael almost laughed. “You don’t want me, Ivy. Your father put you up to this for his own gain. Well, it worked. Like some lovesick swain I went on some idiotic quest, and now I realize the price for your heart isn’t worth the cost.”

He looked to Sir William. “I’m going to do what I should have done from the beginning. I’m telling you to take your complaint to the Royal Society or confront Kenyon yourself.”

“I need proof,” Sir William argued. “I need a copy of Kenyon’s formula.”

“Knock on his door and ask for it. The man is completely open about his research . . . although he may not trust you. I’m done

with the two of you.”

He started toward the door but Ivy hurried ahead and put herself in his path. “Wait, Michael, what about me? About us?”

“Us?” he questioned, surprised to see she was genuinely upset.

“You’ve always been there for me, Michael. You were the first to promise your devotion.”

He understood now. She wasn’t interested in being his wife. She never had been. His devotion to her had been a prize, a trophy. “I may have been the first but I’m certain I’m not the last. You will die brokenhearted, Ivy.”

“And will your country girl?” she countered petulantly.

“I’m going to make certain she doesn’t,”
he promised, and left in search of Jocelyn.

Chapter Sixteen



Miss Kenyon's Decision

Michael knew he would find Jocelyn in her garden.

She sat on a bench, watching a fat robin chase a beetle. He walked across the flagstone path, his booted heels announcing his arrival. She did not look up, even after the robin flew away.

He stopped, uncertain of his welcome. "It's not what you think," he said.

She smiled, not looking at him. "How do you know what I think?"

"I can imagine." A beat. "Jocelyn, I confessed the truth last night and I have never misled you about Ivy."

“Ivy” she repeated. “It’s a lovely name.”

“Lovely or not, Ivy no longer means anything to me.” He waited, expecting a response—a smile, a blink.

There was none.

He knew he was going to have to give more. He walked the few remaining steps between them and knelt at her feet. “Jocelyn, I loved her once or thought I did. We were both young when we met and I was the youngest of five brothers, all of them more successful and offered more opportunities than I had. She noticed me. She made me feel special and I worshiped her. Can you not understand how it was?”

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me, Michael,” she said coolly.

She shifted as if preparing to leave. He

placed his hand on the bench, his arm blocking her escape. “For Ivy, I made something of myself. I—” He paused. He could not explain the horrors of war, the risks he had taken to line his coffers and gain rank and privilege. Here in the peace of her garden, such things should not be mentioned. Instead, he said, “When I returned from the Continent, she did not have time for me. The pain of rejection and blow to my pride was unbearable. I’d hoped to prove myself again by performing this small task for her father. Jocelyn, I thought I could not live without Ivy and yet, you’ve made me see differently. Ivy means nothing to me. Not anymore.”

Her lips twisted at the irony of their respective situations. The expression in her

eyes softened. She lightly brushed her fingers down the side of his jaw and then let her hand drop. “I have no regrets either, much to my embarrassment. Before you came, I was thinking you were a lesson I had to learn. One I should have discovered with Thomas.”

He did not like being compared to the farmer. He would have said so, except she continued, “Good-bye, Michael. I know you have unfinished business with my uncle. I’ll send him out so the two of you may talk. However, I believe matters between us are settled.”

“Jocelyn—”

She pressed her fingers over his lips, stopping words. “It isn’t your decision, Michael. But mine.”

“You can’t just walk away from me. There is something between us, something we shouldn’t let go.”

“Ah, but there is no *trust* between us. Not any longer. Without trust, nothing else matters.”

She was right.

He rocked back, embarrassed by his actions and at a loss as to how to breach the growing chasm between them. “There could be repercussions from last night,” he said, unable to let her go. “You will need me.”

“Are you suggesting I could be with child?” She shook her head. Her curls moved with their own vitality while the expression in her eyes was distant. “I’m not.” She placed her hand on her abdomen. “If I were, I’d know. I’d sense it. So, you

truly are free . . . whether you decide to return to Ivy or not.”

She stood and, this time, he let her go.

However, she'd only taken four steps when he came to his feet. “Is it because of Ivy . . . or is there some other reason?”

She hesitated, then said succinctly, “I’m sorry, Michael, but you were not a gentleman.” She walked into the house.

Her verdict stunned him.

She was right. He'd compromised himself in attempting to please Ivy and he'd lost sight of what was really important.

He'd also lost the woman he loved.

Love. The word reverberated in his mind. From the first moment he'd laid eyes on Jocelyn, he'd been attracted to her, but love?

A bee buzzed happily behind him, making its way from one rose to another, and he knew that last night, his body had understood what his mind had not yet accepted—he'd fallen in love with Jocelyn. Truly, deeply, madly in love.

And now she was gone from him, her trust lost.

He had no choice but to leave and he went where many a young man turns when he wishes to lose himself in sorrow. He went to the pub.



From her bedroom window, Jocelyn watched Michael put on his hat and leave the garden. Only then did she let down the curtain and, throwing herself on her bed,

gave in to a good cry.

But she had pride this time. Oh, yes, she'd kept her pride.



Outside his niece's bedroom door, Uncle Geoff helplessly listened to her sobs and they tore at his heart. He'd known how to bandage bumps on the head and help solve a list of sums . . . but how did one heal a broken heart?

He'd thought she was getting over Thomas—a man he'd never really liked—and he'd been pleased with Donaldson. There had been true magic between the young couple.

Whatever had happened, Donaldson was a fool to let Jocelyn go—and he should tell

him.

Once the idea took hold, Uncle Geoff could not give it up. The time had come for him to champion Jocelyn's cause. So, he did something he rarely did. He took his hat and headed out the door, fully intent on hunting Donaldson down and giving him a piece of his mind.

Chapter Seventeen



The Rooster's Den

The Rooster's Den was busy at noonday when Michael made his way there.

He chose a chair in a far corner, ordered a local ale, and would have drowned his disappointments—except for the odd sensation that someone was watching him. He looked to his left and saw Burkhardt giving him the evil eye.

Michael raised his tankard and toasted the bastard who appeared already half in his cups.

Burkhardt stood and made his way over on unsteady feet. Several of the pub patrons knew him and called out good-natured

jokes about his upcoming betrothal. Burkhardt ignored them. Reaching Michael's table, he practically fell into the chair across from him.

"You've won," he slurred out.

"Won what?" Michael asked.

"Joss. She's yours and I am doomed to unhappiness." Burkhardt placed his arms on the table and slowly lowered his head to rest his chin on top.

"You are soon to be a married man." Michael couldn't resist the jab.

"Joss says I should be happy. She says Elfreda loves me. Maybe she does," he finished. "But I shall miss Joss. Of course, I didn't realize it until you arrived. I thought I had everything in control."

"As did I," Michael agreed and felt a

stab of sympathy for his rival. He added, "Lady Elfreda is nothing like her cousin."

"Ivy?" Burkhardt shuddered. "She's a man-eater, that one."

"I wish you'd given me that advice earlier," Michael muttered. "*Years* earlier."

"What?" Burkhardt asked, not even listening, and then lazily shook his head. "Lucky devil, you. Got Joss." His mood shifted. He looked around for the barmaid, a round, buxom woman of about fifty-five. "I need another one, Angie dear. And bring one for my new friend."

Angie gave Michael a frank inspection. "You're the one who has been courting Miss Kenyon," she said in greeting. "Aye, I'll fetch another round for both of you."

"She wouldn't talk to me when I jilted

Joss,” Thomas confided. “I suppose she has gotten over it.” He hiccuped. “S’cuse me.” He laid his head back down.

The door opened, spreading rays of daylight into the dark pub and Geoffrey Kenyon walked in, dressed in a bottle-green jacket and starched white neckcloth. His appearance in the pub was enough of a novelty to attract attention. He looked around the room, spied Michael and started heading his way.

“Oh pother,” Thomas mumbled. “Joss’s uncle. He never liked me.”

“He’s going to like me even less,” Michael answered.

“What?” Thomas repeated again, so caught up in his own worries he hadn’t been attending.

“Never mind.”

Kenyon came up to the table. “Donaldson, I must talk to you.” It was obvious he’d been giving this a great deal of thought and would have his say one way or the other.

“You are welcome to join us,” Michael said grandly, “but first I must tell you my name’s not Donaldson. It’s Sanson. Michael Sanson. *Colonel* Michael Sanson.”

Thomas lifted his head and Angie, who had returned, paused as she set their tankards on the table. Nor did she hurry to leave.

“Ah, so that’s part of it,” Kenyon said, as if piecing matters together in his own mind. He pulled up a chair and sat. “Go on, let’s have the rest.”

“It isn’t flattering,” Michael said, surprised the man wasn’t more suspicious. Instead he seemed ready to hear a bedtime tale.

“Schemes never are,” Kenyon said. “I mean, Jocelyn schemed to make Burkhardt jealous and you know that didn’t work.”

“It worked very well,” Burkhardt mumbled. “I’m out of my mind.”

Angie hit him with her tray. “She’s not for you. You are to marry a real lady and you’d best do it or your mother will make your life miserable.”

“There is that,” Burkhardt conceded, and Michael couldn’t help but smile.

“Is there more?” Kenyon asked with interest.

“Oh, yes, much more.” Michael

proceeded to tell him the story of Sir William's formula. He didn't stint on his own culpability; however, he was prudent enough to omit the part when he'd made mind-numbing love to the man's niece in his laboratory. Too much honesty could be a touchy thing.

Angie and Burkhardt listened, and others quickly joined them, all seemingly with a vested interest in Jocelyn's welfare.

"So you *were* burglarizing Mr. Kenyon's house?" Angie clarified with disapproval.

Surprisingly, Kenyon came to his aid. "Sir William's tactics were crude but this isn't the first time this sort of thing has gone on in science, Angie. Especially with something like this where there is the smell of money."

"So what of Sir William's charge that the

formula is his?” Michael asked.

“It could be.” Kenyon surprised Michael with his answer. He shrugged. “He could have done work that was ‘borrowed’ by another. However, *I* did not take the formula and can prove my innocence through my correspondence. I don’t know but Randolph Redding could have taken the formula. I’d assumed he’d started with his own experiments. Or Sir William may have had very little to do with the formula’s inception and wishes to claim a larger share for himself. This idea of waterproof cloth is not glamorous but has many practical applications. Of course the matter is moot. We can’t seem to change the properties of rubber without turning it into a sticky mess.” He started to go into a detailed explanation,

but his audience groaned with dismay and quickly dispersed to other parts of the room, taking Burkhardt with them.

Alone with Kenyon, Michael leaned back in his chair and admitted, "I'm a fool." His damn single-mindedness had led him to unwise decisions.

Kenyon contradicted him. "You are only a fool if you let Jocelyn go."

Pushing his tankard aside with one finger, Michael said to Kenyon. "You've taken my confession well."

"I like you." He added quietly, "You did me a favor by making my niece see how pompous Burkhardt is."

"Well, now she has shown me my shortcomings," Michael said.

"And they are?" Kenyon asked.

Michael was ruthless. "Pride. Vanity." He thought of the beautiful, mercurial creature Jocelyn had been in his arms last night. "And that Trust is to be valued."

"You can trust Jocelyn," Kenyon said.

"Aye . . . but she no longer trusts me. Burkhardt and I have both hurt her."

"Because you've disappointed her," Kenyon answered. "Who among us has not done that at one time or another? The child disappoints the parent. Parents are not all they should be. Lovers are never perfect." He rapped the table with his knuckles. "What is important is your willingness to make amends. You must win her back."

"I begged—"

"Not beg, man. I said *win*. Do you love her?"

“Yes,” Michael replied without hesitation.

“Then show her the very best of yourself. You are a good man. I would choose you for my niece. But winning the battle, storming her senses, and bringing her into your arms—that is up to you.”

“You are so certain I could succeed?” Michael asked.

A twinkle appeared in the scientist’s eye. “I haven’t spent a lifetime studying chemistry without learning how to recognize combustible reactions, and you and Jocelyn are very well-suited. However, the question I have is, do you want to win her? Or are you sitting here feeling guilty over having been caught in your deceptions?”

Michael sat back, struck by the shrewd assessment.

“I mean no offense, Colonel,” Kenyon added.

“None taken,” Michael answered. He sat up. “You are right. I wanted Ivy out of pride. Other men envied such a beauty and I treated her with the arrogance of showing off a prized possession. I can honestly say, I feel no connection to her.”

“And Jocelyn? Do you desire her?”

“God, yes. However, my feelings for her run deeper and I am as astounded as anyone. I’ve known her days, mere hours, and yet I feel I’ve known her forever. The sight of her curls makes me smile. And when she has an idea, her nose wrinkles . . . and I could listen to the sound of her laughter forever. From the moment I met her, I could think of no one but her.

However, she has seen me for the fool I am.”

“All women see us for the fools we are. God is merciful though, and also gives them the capacity to forgive us.” Kenyon clapped Michael on the back. “Have heart, Colonel. You can win her back.”

“How?”

Her uncle smiled. “By being yourself.”

Chapter Eighteen



Lord Vaughn's Ball

Jocelyn dried her eyes and forced herself to go on with her daily chores. Uncle Geoff had gone out, which was unusual. It was entirely possible he'd been successful the night before and discovered the elusive result he'd been seeking.

He returned home in the late afternoon looking pleased with himself and smelling of ale.

Because of her lack of sleep the night before, Jocelyn went to bed early and slept hard. She sensed she was in mourning for what could have been. Her feelings for Michael had run deep, deeper than they had

for Thomas. She felt as if a part of herself was missing and was powerless to imagine how to make herself whole.

The next morning, Mrs. Jeter personally delivered the dress Michael had purchased. Jocelyn graciously complimented the needlework but later told her uncle she could not wear it.

“I bought this dress for your enjoyment,” Uncle Geoff said.

Jocelyn took his hand. “You didn’t buy this dress at all. I overheard everything you and Michael said. It is best I wear my yellow muslin.”

Still, for all her fine words, Jocelyn couldn’t help but open the box and take a peek at the dress Michael had chosen for her. She caught her breath. The overdress of

rose tissue was gorgeous. She would have felt very special wearing such a dress.

Jocelyn put the lid on the box, not even bothering to hang the dress up.

Late that afternoon, she began preparing herself, putting on her yellow muslin and styling her hair high on her head. Instead of letting her curls flow freely down to her shoulders, she tied them up with a piece of emerald ribbon so she appeared more mature. At four and twenty, the time had come for her to set aside girlish styles.

Uncle Geoff looked stately in black evening dress. Yes, the style of his coat was perhaps a decade or two old but he still looked remarkable and he acted as if he were anticipating the evening. "Ready?" he asked.

She nodded. "You look very handsome."

He considered her for a moment, then said evenly, "So do you."

She did not comment.



Lord Vaughn's house was filled with light. Candles burned everywhere. Lanterns had been strung in the garden and already half the parish strolled the grounds while listening to the musicians playing for their enjoyment.

The ball was to be held in the house's great hall.

A receiving line greeted Jocelyn and her uncle at the front door. A butler grandly announced their names. He carried a staff embellished with brightly colored ribbons

and pounded the floor with it to gain the crowd's attention and add decorum to the proceedings. Announced, Jocelyn and her uncle moved forward to meet Lord and Lady Vaughn. Next to Lady Vaughn stood her daughter, Elfreda. For a second, her gaze met Jocelyn's and in her eyes, Jocelyn saw such unhappiness her heart went out to the woman who had been her rival.

Thomas didn't meet her gaze. He bowed over her hand and acted as if they were strangers. His mother had no such reluctance.

"Why, Miss Kenyon, what a pleasure to see you this evening. I'd heard you had an escort? I suppose he decided not to come?"

Thomas shifted, his embarrassment at his mother's baiting obvious. Jocelyn answered

in a steady voice, “He could not be with us tonight.”

Elfreda seemed to grow more unhappy and Jocelyn felt guilty.

Uncle Geoff hurried her away. “It’s not your fault,” he said, accurately divining her thoughts.

“Oh, Uncle, you don’t know. I set out to make her miserable and now I am sorry. My behavior was reprehensible. I thought only of myself.”

“You were hurting, Josie.” He clasped her hand in his. “I should have provided more guidance. I was so involved in my experiments, I didn’t know how lost you’d felt until it was too late. However, I am glad you aren’t marrying him. He still has a long way to go until he is a man. Witness the

stiff way he is toward Lady Elfreda.”

Uncle Geoff was right. Thomas seemed to avoid looking at her. “It is unfortunate you and young Sanson could not have met at a different time.”

“You know his real name?” Michael must have talked to her uncle.

Uncle Geoff nodded. “Yes, we spoke, and I want you to remember that just as you are sorry for your self-seeking actions, he has regrets, too.”

A hurtful lump formed in her throat. “I sent him away.”

“I know.”

She searched his face. “Was I wrong?”

Uncle Geoff gave her hand a squeeze. “Only you can decide that, my dear. Ah, there is Mr. and Mrs. Lettman.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” Jocelyn said. “You came to help and, if you wish, I’ll be happy to stay.”

“Nonsense, go and enjoy the party. This is a time to celebrate. I’m going to go find the punch bowl.”

Jocelyn walked off but she definitely felt out of place. Speculative glances were often thrown her way and she overheard Mrs. Jeter sigh with disappointment when she noticed the yellow muslin. She knew on the morrow the gossips would be wondering if the new dress had been a fact or a fiction.

Lucy gave her a welcoming hug but she and Kent were busy talking to other married couples about topics they had in common.

Catching a glimpse of another friend, Jocelyn started in her direction—but she

saw Ivy and stopped.

Lady Elfreda's beautiful cousin took no notice of her. She was busy entertaining half a dozen young men, all begging for dances. Obviously Ivy wasn't going to pine for Michael.

Jocelyn turned and saw her uncle deep in conversation with Sir William. What had once seemed a problem to that gentleman was obviously not one any longer.

And Jocelyn realized she was standing alone. Everyone had someone . . . save her.

Like a martyr resigned to her fate, she found a place for herself amongst the matrons, sitting with the likes of the chatty Mrs. Mayes and the Clark sisters.

The dancing began. Although Jocelyn had always liked to dance, she was not in

the mood to even tap her toe. She was officially “on the shelf.” A spinster. From now on her role would be circumspect, a pillar of volunteer work, and social overseer of such events as this ball without taking part.

The prospect was depressing.

Thomas led Lady Elfreda out onto the floor for the first dance. Soon everyone was up and moving save for the matrons and Jocelyn. The older women attempted to include her in the conversation; however, other than gardening, Jocelyn had nothing to add to the conversation. She’d never had labor pains, nursed a sick child, or worried over a husband’s gout. Being a spinster was a bit like being in a no-man’s-land. Perhaps she would have to move in with the Clark

sisters to learn how to do it right.

If only she could learn to live with this terrible emptiness inside. This loneliness was different than when Thomas had jilted her. This time she knew she'd lost something very precious and would not ever get it back.

There was a lull in the music as one dance ended and couples moved to take positions for the next lively reel. Jocelyn had always loved a reel.

Lord Vaughn's butler pounded his staff against the wood floor for attention to announce a late guest. "Colonel Michael Sanson," he said, his sonorous voice resounding in the sudden quiet.

Jocelyn started at the name. Slowly she turned just as Michael appeared in the

doorway—but not the Michael she'd known.

No, this gentleman wore full military uniform. The tailored cut and gold braid made him seem taller and more broad-shouldered than she could remember. He was undeniably handsome with his silver eyes and dark hair.

A murmur spread through the room. Many recognized him as the tea merchant. Others had already learned he had another identity.

The gossipy Mrs. Mayes touched Jocelyn's arm. "Can you believe? Lady Vaughn's cousin just informed me that he is the son of an earl. He must be very busy being a soldier and peddling tea." She dropped her voice to confide, "He never came to my house as I requested."

An earl's son. Well, of course. Michael had never been what he seemed, Jocelyn thought cynically. She crossed her arms, struggling with an almost overwhelming urge to cry. She knew he'd come for Ivy. She'd done all but hand him to the other woman and suddenly, she didn't think she could stand to see them together.

She rose, wanting to escape, and discovered there was nowhere to go without making a scene. Michael spotted her. Like two focused beams of light, their gazes met and she could not look away.

He began walking toward her with purpose.

Jocelyn could have sworn her heart had stopped beating. She waited, hoping against hope, her feet rooted to the floor.

Michael waded in amongst the matrons. He stopped a mere foot from Jocelyn and held out his hand. “Miss Kenyon, would you do me the honor of this dance?”

Chapter Nineteen



Love's True Light

For a moment, Jocelyn stared at his offered hand, conscious that everyone in the room watched them. Part of her feared Michael and his words were phantoms of her overactive imagination.

Then, tentatively, she placed her hand in his.

Strong fingers clasped hers and she almost cried out in thankfulness.

He raised her hand to his lips—and she knew he was real; this moment was real.

Around her, the matrons watched with wide eyes—Mrs. Burkhardt one of their number.

“Forgive me,” he whispered.

“I’m the one who should be begging forgiveness,” she answered. “We both made some foolish mistakes—”

“That could have cost us dearly,” he finished. “Jocelyn, I must know, will you do me the honor of being my wife? I promise I’ll never be anything other than I am . . . forever.”

He asked her to marry him—right there in the middle of the matrons. Jocelyn glanced around. Uncle Geoff was smiling while Lucy and Kent grinned broadly. The Clark sisters’ eyes were as round as an owl’s as if they could scarce believe their ears, and Mrs. Banks clasped her hands in anticipation. “Do say yes,” she encouraged Jocelyn. “This is the most romantic thing to

ever happen in Wye.”

Her announcement brought joy to her heart. She looked to Michael. “Yes, I will marry you,” she said softly “And I shall promise you that I will never, ever scheme again.”

“Especially to make someone jealous,” he cautioned with good humor, then added soberly, “I’ll be a good husband to you, Jocelyn.”

“And I will be the best of wives.”

The Clark sisters appeared to swoon. Mrs. Banks sighed her satisfaction.

Michael led her out on the dance floor and they took their places next to Lucy and Kent, who gave them hugs and handshakes. Jocelyn caught Michael nodding to someone who stood behind her. She turned

and saw her uncle. A silent communication passed between the two men, an understanding of sorts.

“He knew you were coming, didn’t he?” she asked.

Taking her hand for the set, Michael said, “He made me hope that you would not turn me away a second time.”

“I’m glad,” she answered and then the music started and they celebrated their happiness with dancing.

However, later, when they’d had enough well-wishes and needed a moment alone, Michael took her hand and led her outside to the stone terrace running along the back of the house. There, they found a quiet alcove away from prying eyes and the light of the paper lanterns hanging from the trees.

He took her in his arms. “I need to hear you say it,” he said.

She didn’t need to ask him what he meant; she knew. Reaching up to cup his face in her hands, she said, “I love you, Michael Sanson.”

“And I love you, Jocelyn Kenyon, and will forevermore.”

After a promise like his, she had no choice but to kiss—and do it more than once!



Watching them from the shadows of a large oak tree, Thomas almost couldn’t bear to see Jocelyn so happy. In fact, he’d had to leave the ballroom because there was no one who could have looked at her

and not known she was in love.

Actually, Thomas had nothing against Donaldson or Sanson or whatever his name was—not after drinking in the Rooster’s Den with him. Still, it didn’t make losing Jocelyn any more palatable.

He turned his back on the lovers, and leaned against the oak’s mighty trunk, his mind a maze of doubts and regrets.

He was so involved in his misery, he didn’t see Elfreda’s approach until her quiet voice said, “You left the party.”

With her hands clasped in front of her, she stood in the moonlight, a few steps away from the dark shadows of the tree. Her expression was unreadable in the silvery moonlight, and yet there was no mistaking the sadness about her.

“I needed a moment of air,” he said, lifting his gaze upward to the moon peeking at him through the tree branches.

She was silent for a moment, seemingly accepting his excuse. He expected her to go inside.

Instead, she said, “Thomas, I do not believe we should marry.”

“What?” he demanded ungracefully, swinging his gaze back to her.

“You heard what I said,” she told him in a firm voice that didn’t sound anything like his Elfreda. “I have been thinking and I don’t believe you and I will suit.”

“Why not?” he demanded, walking toward her.

“Because you are in love with someone else.” Her words pierced his conscience.

He stopped, guilty as charged.

“I knew you and Jocelyn had a prior agreement, but I wanted you,” Elfreda continued quietly “From the first moment I saw you walk into church last autumn, I fell in love with you. I know you’ve never truly returned my affections. You were more attracted to my father’s money and the prestige of the marriage. I told myself I could love you enough for both of us and that perhaps someday you would grow to love me.” Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears, but she did not give in to them. “But I’ve discovered something, Thomas. I can’t live with this emptiness inside. I can’t keep hoping for something that will never happen.”

Her words tore at his soul.

For the first time, he truly saw Elfreda as a person and not a trophy to be won. And he came face to face with his own arrogance.

“Good night, Thomas,” she said and turned to go inside. “You needn’t worry. I will tell Mother and Father that I was the one to cry off. I think they will understand.”

Suddenly, he realized he could not let her go, and not just because of scandal or gossip.

No, he couldn’t let her go because he fell in love. It happened suddenly and without expectation.

Here, he realized, was someone who didn’t see him as a dupe of an overbearing mother. Elfreda had made him feel important and in return, he’d taken her gentle feelings for granted and spent his time longing for

what he couldn't have.

Jocelyn had never loved him, not as Elfreda did. He and Joss had *thought* they were in love, but time and time again she'd put off his marriage proposals. First, they had been too young. Then, her uncle had gotten ill. Finally, she'd wanted to wait a year—and he'd been happy to do so.

But Elfreda had always been there for him—and now he was in danger of losing her.

How could he have been so bloody blind?

He caught Elfreda before she started up the steps. Hooking his hand around her arm, he turned her to him. “No, I’m the one who is wrong,” he said firmly, and without waiting for permission, he kissed her fully

on the lips.

This was no gentlemanly kiss or chaste peck. He kissed her with the recognition of a man who has found his mate. Their kiss blossomed. Hunger, need, desire—all could be tasted, and he knew she hadn't given up on him. Not yet.

He hugged her close, feeling the rapid beat of her heart. It matched the rhythm of his own and this woman in his arms took on an importance greater than gold.

“Elfreda, I have been such a fool.”

“No,” she protested in a little voice overcome by emotion—and he realized she was crying. “I mean, I know you would prefer someone as bright as Jocelyn or perhaps more ambitious than I will ever be. Thomas, I can't be more than I am. All I

ever wanted was to take care of you. Will that be enough?”

“It will,” he vowed, “if you are willing to put up with me.” He shook his head. “All I seem to do is hurt those who care for me.”

“You are a bit spoiled,” she ventured in her soft, gentle voice.

“Spoiled?” No one had ever said it to his face before. For a second, he was startled, and then he began to laugh. “Help me be a better person,” he said. “Help me to learn to think of others, especially yourself.”

Her response was a sigh of contentment, the sound so sweet, Thomas *had* to kiss her again.

Chapter Twenty



All's Well

That night, when the clock struck twelve, two betrothals were announced.

And the following Sunday, two banns were posted.

The young couples drew a line, however, at a double wedding ceremony.

Jocelyn and her uncle traveled to Sussex to meet Michael's large and gregarious family. They welcomed her with open arms. Jocelyn found herself surrounded by something she'd always wanted—brothers and sisters.

She and Michael were married in the family chapel on his father's estate. She

wore the white muslin dress with the rose oversheath and red flowers in her hair. Everyone swore she was the loveliest of brides.

Michael resigned his commission. Tired of war, he and Jocelyn purchased a prosperous farm along the banks of the river Avon and not far from Wye. And there they gave birth to and raised three healthy, beautiful children.

Thomas and Elfreda were wed by Vicar Banks and proved to be the happiest of couples . . . even if some whispered she catered to him a bit too much. But then, what had anyone expected? His mother had been the first to spoil him.

Ivy did marry a viscount. Within a year, she'd given him an heir and rumor had it the

two never spoke again although they remained married for twenty-two years. Ivy lived her life with her flirts and her husband took his pleasure where he may.

Unfortunately, neither Uncle Geoffrey's or Sir William's venture into waterproof material fared well. Redding denied ever seeing Sir William's formula. After several complaints to the Royal Society, who largely ignored him, Sir William gave up.

Meanwhile, Uncle Geoff's idea of melting the rubber proved to be of no use at all when two years later, a Scot chemist by the name of Macintosh ascertained coal-tar naphtha was an effective solvent for dispersing and adhering rubber onto material. The Scot patented his discoveries in 1823 and started the manufacture of

raincoats that bore his name.

The setback did not mean Uncle Geoff stopped tinkering. No, not at all. He returned to his love of gunpowder, invented a new trigger for the pistol and lived out his days content with the faithful adoration of Michael and Jocelyn's children . . . who grew very good at putting out Uncle Geoff's occasional fires.

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